

Rendez-vous

My name is Colleena, and we have a rendez-vous. I'm a performance artist living in the south of France thanks to the generous support of my patron, the Italian Count Dix-Ten. There are rumours Dix-Ten may have bought his title. I don't recall my cousin Miranda calling Dix-Ten a count when he was her benefactor. All I know is I'm most grateful for his support, and that I can bear what he demands in return. Things that are free are probably worthless.



Colin Campbell



You already know something about me, though you probably think you don't.

I never did like Mildred. As sisters, we were as different as night and day. "But we're so similar!" she used to say. "I live in Southern California and you live in the south of France!" As if there were any similarity. I'd go visit her in California, since she'd never come here. She'd drag me around shopping malls. Century City, Culver City, Fox Hills Shopping Mall.

And she was always critical of how I looked and dressed. "Gawd, Colleena," she'd say, "do you have to look so butch?" Moi?

Frankly, (and I've never told anyone this) I always thought she looked like she was in drag. That tacky bleached blonde hairdo with those fake Ray-Ban sunglasses. The worst!

I have to confess, I always liked my younger sister, Robin, more. At least when Robin was trying to better herself and the world at the same time.

She started off as a Xerox operator, and was really top-notch, as I understand it.

She had an artistic bent as well. I like to think I was an influence. She started up her own rock band in the '80s. And became quite successful. Talk shows, even a nude spread in *Penthouse*. She had all the looks in our family, I must say. A real glamour puss at heart, but she just walked away from it, all

that fame and fortune and joined CUSO. She trained at the Betty Ford Center. Met Liz Taylor, Liza Minelli. She worked with the best. Of course, she wasn't a multimedia artist like me, but Robin understood my artistic spirit, my profound need to express myself.

I maintain a little pied à terre in Toulouse. It's very close to St. Sernin Basilica. Every morning the swallows dart and circle the tower outside my window.

After watching the swallows one morning, I created this little dance performance piece called "The Swallows of St. Sernin." I imagined my dear friend and fellow expatriate Suzanne in the role of "Queen of the Swallows."

We're such kindred spirits, given that she's a linguist. I call her the "word witch." Well, not to her face, actually.

I think Mildred was jealous of my success as an artist in Europe. After her husband fell off that mountain in the Himalayas, her personality took a strange turn. When I was notified that she'd disappeared in the Mojave, it didn't surprise me. I don't know what it was. The translation, my inadequate French, the bad connection, an incompetent travel agent... whatever. In any case, I ended up in Utah, wrong state, wrong desert, darling. And that's where I began my search for Mildred. I didn't find Mildred. But I found something very unexpected. But that's another story. Another rendez-vous with Colleena! Au revoir!



COLIN CAMPBELL

Rendez-vous





Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self

Catherine Russell

In those early years I got to know the "town" only as the theatre of purchases, on which occasions it first became apparent how my father's money could cut a path for us between the shop counters and assistants and mirrors, and the appraising eyes of our mother, whose muff lay on the counter.

— WALTER BENJAMIN, *A Berlin Chronicle*

In Benjamin's chronicle of his Berlin childhood, he places the problem of memory centrally. "For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life."¹ The fragmentary recollections that he offers are rich in detail, and, like the passage quoted above, situate him as a child within a complex network of social relations. A class analysis is projected onto fleeting memories, along with a recognition of gender roles, and even an analysis of the gaze. The materialism of Benjamin's autobiographical account of Berlin is made even more explicit in his Moscow diary, which he described as a text in which "factuality is already theory."²

Throughout his various autobiographical writings, a sense of the self emerges that is thoroughly grounded in experience and observation. Walter Benjamin develops as a socially constructed identity, one who finds himself in a shifting series of others, in the topography of city streets, and in the detail of daily life. Theory, philosophy, and intellectual life were inseparable from his own experience of modernity, and his identity as a German Jew pervades his writing in the form of experience rather than essence. Susan Buck-Morss suggests that "Benjamin perceived his own life emblematically, as an allegory for social reality, and sensed keenly that no individual could live a resolved or affirmative existence in a social world that was neither."³

As literary genres, autobiography and ethnography share "a commitment to the actual," and Michael Fischer has argued that "ethnic autobiography" should be recognized as a model of postmodern ethnography.⁴ Autobiography is a technique of self-representation that is not a fixed form, but is in constant flux. He describes "contemporary autobiography" as an exploration of the fragmented and dispersed identities of late twentieth-century pluralist society. In this context, ethnic autobiography is an "art of memory" that serves as protection against the homogenizing tendencies of modern industrial culture. Moreover, autobiography has become a powerful tool of cultural criticism, paralleling postmodern theories of textuality and knowledge. Fischer describes the "writing tactics" of autoethnography as follows: "Contemporary ethnic autobiographies partake of the mood of metadiscourse, of drawing attention to their linguistic and fictive nature, of using the narrator as an inscribed figure within the text whose manipulation calls attention to authority structures."

This ethnographic mode of self-representation is pervasive in what has become widely recognized as a "new autobiography" in film and video.⁵ Autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film- or videomaker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes. Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a "staging of subjectivity"—a representation of the self as a performance. In the politicization of the personal, identities are frequently played out among

several cultural discourses, be they ethnic, national, sexual, racial, and/or class based. The subject "in history" is rendered destabilized and incoherent, a site of discursive pressures and articulations.

The fragmented and hybrid identities produced in the multitude of "personal" films and videos have been celebrated by critics and theorists as forms of "embodied knowledge" and "politics of location."⁶ Their tactics are similar to those of the literary form described by Fischer, and yet they also destabilize the very notion of ethnicity. One's body and one's historical moment may be the joint site of experience and identity, and yet they don't necessarily add up to ethnicity as an anthropological category. Autoethnography is a vehicle and a strategy for challenging imposed forms of identity, and exploring the discursive possibilities of inauthentic subjectivities.

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Mary Louise Pratt introduced the term "autoethnography" as an oppositional term: "If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations."⁷ Although she denies that autoethnographic texts are "authentic" texts, her attribution of this genre to marginalized subjects is characteristic of writing on this genre. Whereas Pratt's usage reaffirms the duality of centre and margin, I would argue that autoethnography can also be a form of what James Clifford calls "self-fashioning," in which the ethnographer comes to represent himself as a fiction, inscribing a doubleness within the ethnographic text: "Though it portrays other selves as culturally constituted, it also fashions an identity authorized to represent, to interpret, even to believe—but always with some irony—the truths of discrepant worlds."⁸ Once ethnography is reframed as a self-representation in which any and all subjects are able to enter discourse in textual form, the distinctions between textual authority and pro-filmic reality begin to break down. The imperial eye looking back on itself is also a subject in history.

The oxymoronic label "autoethnography" announces a total breakdown of the colonialist precepts of ethnography, and indeed the critical enthusiasm for its various forms situates it as a kind of ideal form of anti-documentary. Diary filmmaking, autobiographical filmmaking and personal videos can all be subsumed within what Michael Renov has described as the "essayistic" impulse in recent film and video. The essay is a useful category because it incorporates the "I" of the writer into a commentary on the world that makes no grand scientific or totalizing claims but is uncertain, tentative, and speculative.⁹

A common feature of autoethnography is the first-person voice-over that is intently and unambiguously subjective. This is, however, only one of three levels on which a film- or videomaker can inscribe themselves, the other two being at

the origin of the gaze, and as body-image. The multiple possible permutations of these three "voices"—speaker, seer, and seen—are what generate the richness and diversity of autobiographical filmmaking. In addition to the discursive possibilities of these three voices is another form of identity which is that of the avant-garde filmmaker as collagist and editor. This is perhaps the surrealist heritage of the form, the role of juxtaposition, irony, and *retrouvé*, through which the film- or videomaker "writes" an identity in temporal structures. By inscribing themselves on the level of "metadiscourse," film- and videomakers also identify with their technologies of representation, and a culture of independent filmmaking, alongside their other discursive identities.

Much of the new autobiography emanates from queer culture, from film- and videomakers whose personal histories unfold within a specifically public sphere.¹⁰ It is also produced by many for whom ethnicity or race casts their own history as an allegory for a community or culture that cannot be essentialized. Themes of displacement, immigration, exile, and transnationality are prominent in this mode of filmmaking.¹¹ Some of the film- and videomakers associated with the "new autobiography" include Richard Fung, Marlon Riggs, Su Friedrich, Rea Tajiri, Deborah Hoffman, Vanylyn Green, Margaret Stratton, Lynn Herschmann, Mark Massi, Hara Kazuo, Tony Buba, Mona Hatoum, and many others. Marilu Mallet's *Journal Inachévé*, Hara Kazuo's *Extremely Personal Eros* (1974), Akerman's *News From Home* (1976), and Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1978) are all important examples of the form as it developed in the 1970s. Family histories and political histories unfold as difficult processes of remembering and struggle. Specific, resonant images echo across distances of time and space. Documentary truth is freely mixed with storytelling and performances. The many film- and videomakers who have made and continue to make autoethnographies find "themselves" in diverse image cultures, images, and discourses. Many are concerned to transform image culture through the production of new voices and new subjectivities.

A prominent theme in contemporary personal cinema is the staging of an encounter with the filmmaker's parent(s) or grandparent(s), who often embody a particular cultural history of displacement or tradition. The difference between generations is written across the filmmaker's own inscription in technology, and thus it is precisely an ethnographic distance between the modern and the premodern that is dramatized in the encounter—through interview or archival memory or both. One often gets the sense that the filmmaker has no memory, and is salvaging their own past through the recording of their family's memory.

The testimonial, confessional character of autoethnography often assumes a site of authenticity and veracity, originating in the filmmaker's experience. And yet fake diaries and autobiographies by Orson Welles (*F is for Fake*, 1975), Michelle

Citron (*Daughter Rite*), Jim McBride (*David Holzman's Diary*) and Joe Gibbons and Tony Oursler's *Onourown* (1990) demonstrate the unreliability of the form. The confessional mode is a testimonial discourse with no necessary validity beyond the viewer's faith in the text's authority. Autobiographical film and video is often couched within a testimonial mode, as the authorial subjects offer themselves up for inspection, as anthropological specimens. But they do so ironically, mediating their own image and identifying also, always, with the technologies of representation, identifying themselves as film- and videomakers. Because autoethnography invokes an imbrication of history and memory, the authenticity of experience functions as a receding horizon of truth in which memory and testimony are often articulated as modes of salvage.

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The film- and videomakers whom I will discuss in what follows are Jonas Mekas, George Kuchar, Sadie Benning, and Kidlat Tahimik, artists whose films and videos foreground many of the contradictions and tendencies of the diary film. As a genre of "personal cinema," the diary film is not, in itself, necessarily a form of experimental ethnography, and yet these examples are suggestive of the role of the diary film and video in the rethinking of ethnographic knowledge. The role of identity in these films and tapes demands an expanded notion of "ethnicity" as a cultural formation of the subject. Indeed, what unites these diverse texts is the articulation of identities that are split, insecure, and plural. Memory and travel are means of exploring fragmented selves and placing ethnicity at one remove, as something to remember, to see, but not quite to experience.

The journeys undertaken by these filmmakers are both temporal and geographic, often tending toward epic proportions. The diary form also involves a journey between the times of shooting and editing; travelling becomes a form of temporal experience through which the film- or videomaker confronts themselves as tourist, ethnographer, exile, or immigrant. These film- and videomakers may not be representative of the extraordinary diversity of personal, autoethnographic film forms, but they do cover a range of techniques and strategies that merge self-representation with cultural critique. They suggest that the subjective form of ethnography distinguishes itself above all from the passive scientism of conventional ethnographic forms by destabilizing "ethnicity" and its constraints on subjectivity.

When P. Adams Sitney first discussed autobiography as an avant-garde film form, he concluded that "it is the autobiographical cinema per se that confronts fully the rupture between the time of cinema and the time of experience and invents forms to contain what it finds there."¹² Subjectivity cannot be denoted as simply in film as with the written "I," but finds itself split in time. The image of the filmmaker him- or herself, when it appears in a diary film, refers to another cameraperson, or to a tripod that denotes an empty, technologized gaze. As

Janine Marchessault points out, "The image of someone behind the camera encompasses its own impossibility as a representation unable to access its origin, to invert its own process."¹³ Subjectivity is split again between the seeing and the filmed body. If for Sitney, the "self" of autobiographical filmmaking is united in the notion of authorship, an ethnographic subjectivity, a self that understands itself as culturally constituted, is more fundamentally split in the autobiographical mode. Even when the subject in history is constructed as a point of origin for memories, geographic and spatial distance comes to evoke a distance in time that separates different moments of the self.

The autoethnographic subject blurs the distinction between ethnographer and Other by travelling, becoming her- or himself a stranger in a strange land, even if that land is a fictional space existing only in representation. As a diary of a journey, the travelogue produces an otherness in the interstices of the fragmented "I" of the filmic, textual self. As the memory of the trip becomes enmeshed with historical processes and cultural differences, the filmic image becomes the site of a complex relationship between "I was there" and "this is how it is." Travel films are collections of images made for other spectators in distant cultures and therefore constitute a kind of traffic in images with the traveller-filmmaker as their unreliable referent and point of origin. Needless to say, the utopian impulse of autoethnography relies on a certain mobility of the filmmaker and remains in many ways couched in modernist, imperialist, and romantic discourses.

If filmic autobiography exploits the temporal lag between filming and editing, video diaries tend to have a slightly different temporal effect. One of the things I want to indicate by my choice of films and tapes is how the history of autoethnography intersects with the slow fade in independent filmmaking from film to video. If autobiography is about time and history, as Benjamin suggests, these two mediums produce very different effects of temporality that has some bearing on the historical subjectivities and identities produced within their technological spheres. Video offers an economics of "coverage" that is impossible to match with 16mm film production costs, and so the diaristic mode is in many ways being renewed as filmmakers take advantage of the economies of the new medium. (This is not to say that avant-garde film is "dead," just that it is becoming increasingly difficult to finance.)¹⁴ Autoethnography in film and video is always mediated by technology and so, unlike its written forms, identity will be an effect not only of history and culture, but also of the history and culture of technologies of representation.

Trinh Minh-ha has written about the Inappropriate Other as the subject whose intervention "is necessarily that of both a deceptive insider and a deceptive outsider."¹⁵ She implies that such a figure actually lurks within every "I," and if one of the goals of a postcolonial ethnography is to become aware of how

subjectivity is implicated in the production of meaning, the Inappropriate Other is the figure to be developed. By exploring autoethnography as an intercultural, cross-cultural method, I hope to suggest how the Inappropriate Other functions as a time traveller who journeys in memory and history.

Jonas Mekas and the Loss of Experience

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Jonas Mekas's diary films are perhaps the prototypical autoethnographies, at the same time as they mark a kind of penultimate romanticism that has long been eclipsed in postmodernism. Although a great deal has been written about his project, it needs to be situated within an ethnographic frame to fully appreciate the way that the film medium mediates between individual and social histories, and between memory and historical time.¹⁶ Mekas's role in the development of the American avant-garde involved the promotion of both personal filmmaking, and a film culture that would form itself around the "truth" and "freedom" of a non-commercial, independent cinema. His diary project, which comprises about thirteen hours of edited footage, is testimony to his commitment to these twin goals.¹⁷

Memorialization and loss are the defining characteristics of Mekas's diary films, and he renders them as features of the medium itself, enhanced by his poetic, melancholy narration. The temporal gap between the collection of images and the editing of them into films many years later renders every image a memory, a trace or fragment of a time in a trajectory that reaches back to what David James has described as "the absent center of the entire project, the footage of his childhood in Lithuania." James points out that not only was this footage never shot, "it is, historically and logically, inconceivable," because the lost past is a pre-industrial, pastoral ideal.¹⁸ James also suggests that Mekas "lived modernism's master narrative, the history of the displacement of the organic and the rural by the industrial and the urban."

Mekas was very explicitly attempting to "salvage an identity" from his practice of filming. At the same time, that identity is precisely that of a displaced person. If homelessness is Mekas's self-image, it is also his filmic technique, his refusal to stop on any image, to synchronize any sound and image, or to narrate any image. Mekas's diary films assume a structure similar to that of found-footage filmmaking: the image track is highly fragmented and belongs to the past, while the sound track provides a narrational continuity that belongs to the present. It is as if, editing his own material, Mekas "finds" the images and retrieves them, re-enacting the structure of memory in found-footage filmmaking, the difference being the inherently subjective status of the found images. It is a highly redemptive project insofar as he brings together the fragments of his memory and integrates

them in an avant-garde film, which immediately assumes all the trappings of a "work of art" in the cultural politics of Mekas's milieu.

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Mekas's project has been described as an exemplary instance of "secondary revision," the process by which, in psychoanalysis, the patient recounts the dream, revising it and substituting a verbal narration for what was originally "experienced" as dream.¹⁹ As Renov explains, "We are all of us lost in the chasm between our desire to recapture the past and the impossibility of a pristine return, no one more than Mekas himself."²⁰ In the revisionary process, Mekas casts himself as both anthropologist and native informant. When, near the beginning of *Lost Lost Lost*, Mekas says "and I was there with my camera," he reveals his mission as the self-appointed documentarian of the Lithuanian community in New York.

Over shots of a man in a dark kitchen, he says "You never know what a DP [Displaced Person] feels like in the evening, in New York," indicating the epistemological limits of his silent film footage. And yet, the wholesale melancholia of his narration ascribes feelings to many of the people in his films. His extensive use of classical music and folksongs provides the films with an emotional register that is lacking from the relatively neutral image track. While the poetics of the soundtrack make the diary Mekas's own, the central, unresolved contradiction of his films is that they are of other people. The people he films—the Lithuanian community in exile in New York, his friends in the world of avant-garde film, his family in Lithuania, and the many people he films on the streets of New York—become the bystanders of his life.

Mekas's diary films provide a heuristic model for all subsequent autobiographical filmmaking because they illustrate how the conceit of displacement masks a control over images. In the split between sound and image tracks, Mekas inscribes himself as a journey, as a survivor of his own past. Having spent time in a German labour camp, he has earned the right to such an identity, one which he then maps onto a specific set of social spheres and communities. *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, made in 1972 from footage shot in 1971 and the 1950s, is the film in which Mekas confronts himself as ethnographer. It is a role that he refuses to assume, and he takes refuge in the avant-garde community where the weight of history and identity can be transcended through art.

Mekas's voice-over begins the American section of the film by designating a moment "when I forgot about my home." He's walking in the woods with friends, but edits in some snow scenes as he says this, so that the "moment" cannot be pinned down. If his voice-over constitutes a form of secondary revision, it is consistently inadequate. The forgetting is as pervasive as the remembering, and the voice-over seems to follow its own trajectory through the film, registering

a present-tense that is inspired by the re-viewing of images of the past, but is extremely distanced from it. From the 1950s in the U.S., the film moves to "100 Glimpses of Lithuania" and a final section shot in Vienna, both sections filmed during a trip in 1971.

The Lithuanian footage in *Reminiscences* is far more brightly lit than any other imagery in the film, and it is virtually all shot outside, in fields, on roads, by rivers and forests, and in front of homes. Mekas takes full advantage of the Bolex camera's light weight and shutter control. The camera is in constant motion, cutting up and cutting into the field of vision. Faces last only marginally longer than other body parts, as Mekas breaks down everything he sees into partial views. Each of the one hundred glimpses seems to be edited in-camera, including pixilated sequences as well as some longer takes of landscape. Many of the people are seen only in long-shot and it is not easy to identify the members of Mekas's large family, despite occasional intertitles introducing them. Mekas himself appears fairly often in family groups and he seems to fit right in. In fact many people beside Jonas wield cameras in this film, as the whole family appears intent on the celebratory memorialization of Mekas's project. The fragmentary nature of these glimpses seems destined to eradicate a present tense and to see everything as if it were already memory.

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Lithuania in 1971 may not be the Edenic return to childhood for which Mekas longs, but it is a pre-industrial rural culture that his family represents. In a catalogue entry Mekas describes the film: "You don't see how Lithuania is today; you see it only through the memories of a displaced person back home for the first time in twenty-five years."²¹ Maureen Turim has pointed out how Mekas's mother in the Lithuanian section of *Reminiscences* constitutes "the fantasy of a center"; the memories, like the mother, cannot be possessed.²² She also comments on Mekas's failure to refer to contemporary Lithuanian politics, returning again and again to the history of his own anti-Nazi activities that led to his exile.²³ Time appears to stand still in Lithuania, and Mekas tries hard to make it represent his past: "those were beautiful days." He wonders where all his childhood friends have gone to, listing the various horrors of wartime Europe: graveyards, torture rooms, prisons, and labour camps. "Your faces remain the same in my memory. They have not changed. It is me who is getting older." We see people entering a barn, doing farm chores as he says this, standing in for those lost friends.

Mekas introduces his friends Peter Kubelka and Annette Michelson as "saints." He worships their ability to be "at home" in culture, and this is in fact the way that Mekas finds his "home" in the New York avant-garde. As Jeffrey Ruoff has described, Mekas's films constitute the "home movies" of the avant-garde, at once assuming and creating a network of familiarity with the various members of his community.²⁴ But Mekas's place in the art world he documents is still

behind the camera, still split between the two selves filming and speaking, still displaced, at home only when he is not at home.

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The longing for the past that Mekas expresses constructs memory as a means of splitting oneself across a number of different axes: child and adult, old world and new, pastoral and metropolitan, natural and cultural. Filmmaking is inscribed in a film such as *Reminiscences* as the means of transcending this splitting. Represented as a process and a practice, filmmaking is a craft that is not necessarily antithetical to the pre-industrial ideal of Mekas's Lithuanian childhood. The idea of a film diary, according to Mekas, "is to react (with your camera) immediately, now, this instant."²⁵ Like the *verité* filmmakers, Mekas's film practice was motivated by a notion of phenomenological and emotional truth. The authenticity of the footage is completely bound up in the honesty and humility of the filmmaker. And yet the diary film, as a product, overlays this raw experience with a complex textuality of sound and image.²⁶

Unlike home movies, Mekas's films betray a deeply poetic sensibility that is alienated not only from the past, but from the very immediacy of experience that informs the diary imagery. The ethnographic discourse of Mekas's films is at once a lost innocence and a pursuit of "freedom" modelled on his escape from European tyranny. Many scenes shot in Lithuania, and in Austria with Kubelka, feature people "playing" like children, running about, hands held high. In a sense, Mekas performs his childhood, constructing a complex world upon a fantasy of loss. Childhood was a privileged theme in the avant-garde of the 1960s as the site of a spontaneity and uncorrupted vision that was sought as an ideal of visionary cinema.²⁷ For Mekas, the spontaneity of direct cinema, like childhood, is always located in an inaccessible past.

If autobiographical cinema constitutes a journey of the self, Jonas Mekas mapped that dislocation onto the historical and geographical dislocation with which so many contemporary filmmakers have become preoccupied. Mekas tells us that there is something inherent within cinematic representation that dislocates the self. The fantasy of identity is produced by the techniques of film practice, and if his diaries indulge this fantasy, they also reveal its limits as ethnography. Mekas's films are all ultimately about himself, and by subsuming history within his own memory, the Others become fictional products of his memory, their own histories evacuated by the melancholia of his loss. Superimposing himself, his desires, his memories, his ego, onto everyone and everything, Mekas's romanticism is a form of possession. For example, in *Reminiscences*, to some children playing, he says, "Run, children, run. I hope you never have to run for your lives."

Mekas is perhaps the exemplary figure of modernist exile, adapting to film what Caren Kaplan has described as a literary genre that tends to generate "aesthetic categories and ahistorical values" by recoding issues of "political conflict,

commerce, labour, nationalist realignments, imperialist expansion, structures of gender, and sexuality." Mekas's nostalgia and melancholia are indicative of the way that displacement functions as a modernist value: "The formation of modernist exile seems to have best served those who would voluntarily experience estrangement and separation in order to produce the experimental cultures of modernism."²⁸ Mekas's alienation is ultimately registered as an unbridgeable gap between himself and others, those whose images he possesses as memories of moments that he imagines to be harmonious social encounters, forgetting that he was, even then, behind the camera.

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Video Diaries

Representing an opposite pole of cynical anti-romanticism, George Kuchar's video diaries are extensive, voluminous, sometimes tedious, and often amusing. More so than any other videomaker, Kuchar uses the camera as a tool of social interaction.²⁹ He creates the impression that he carries a camera with him everywhere, and that it mediates his relation with the world at large. His use of the video medium creates a sense of infinite coverage, potentially breaking down the difference between experience and representation. Like Mekas, Kuchar documents a community of artists and filmmakers, with whom he is "at home." For Kuchar this world is centred at the San Francisco Art Institute where he teaches filmmaking. He often includes glimpses of class projects in his diaries, which are always schlock horror films in the style of Kuchar's own films of the '60s. Kuchar identifies himself sexually, rather than ethnically, but his sexuality is bound up with a host of insecurities that his video practice seems only to aggravate.

From 1986 to 1990 Kuchar released forty-five tapes that fall into two main series: "Weather Diaries" and "Video Diaries." The first document his annual trips to "Tornado Alley," in the central and southern United States, where he goes to view tornadoes. The second includes trips to visit friends in different states as well as diaries made of his activities closer to home; these tapes feature his friends, colleagues, and students. A constant overlap between the diaries, and an internal referentiality, link them as an ongoing record of Kuchar's life. At the end of *Weather Diary 3*, for example, he says, "*Weather Diary 4* will take place in Milwaukee, so see you then," borrowing the conventions and ephemerality of a television series.

Where this diary project differs most profoundly from Mekas's is in Kuchar's use of video without a process of secondary revision. He always shoots with synchronized sound, and offers an ongoing commentary on what he is seeing, often talking to people in front of the camera. Most of his music, including snippets of "movie music" indicating suspense, is recorded from live sources,

and the soundtrack is full of ambient noise, including dogs and cats, traffic, weather, tv, and radio. He also claims that the tapes are entirely edited in-camera, including sequences that are taped over previous ones, enabling him to construct non-chronological editing patterns. The effect is one of randomness and improvisation, enhanced by his off-the-cuff synch-sound narration.³⁰ Whether this is true or not is less important than the effect of immediacy this creates, the way in which experience is rendered textual, without historical depth or distance.³¹

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Kuchar often intercuts close-ups of himself, employing principles of continuity editing in order to inscribe his point of view into the tapes. This narrative technique endows the texts with a certain hermeticism, accentuating the sense of infinite coverage by creating a seamless diegesis despite the ad-hoc, improvised style of narration and shooting. Memory is invoked by Kuchar only through the proffering of still photos to the video gaze, and not as a structure of loss and salvage. Compared to Mekas's tragic sadness, Kuchar's video and weather diaries are ironically cynical, and his self-analysis is often self-deprecating. Although Kuchar also "finds" himself through the practice of filming, his project is not one of redemption.

Kuchar represents his life as a tedious banality emblematised in the annual tornado-viewing trip. The catastrophe of the storms themselves is dispersed into the monotony of waiting in motel rooms, where the tornadoes are finally viewed on television. In Kuchar's "Weather Diaries" series he is most explicitly identified as a tourist, travelling to different parts of the country, staying in motels ostensibly to document weather phenomena, but inevitably finding people in the process. He never travels outside the United States, and yet his mode of production has the effect of inscribing a threatening "otherness" in everything and everyone he shoots. A discourse of "horror" is extracted from the banality of rural America.

Weather Diary 1, Kuchar's pilgrimage to rural Oklahoma in the height of its tornado season, is most basically an extended analogy between "severe storms and gastric distress." In *Weather Diary 3* he returns to the Reno motel and this time he obsesses about his unfulfilled sex life. He tapes some boys at the motel pool through a crack in a fence, and lustily boils hot-dogs in his room. Kuchar's scatological humour is at times juvenile, but while many avant-garde filmmakers have masturbated for the camera, when George does it, he understands the pathetic irony of the act. He forces the viewer to watch him as we would a horror movie. In *Weather Diary 3* he meets another storm chaser, whom he takes out on dates to the local shopping mall. "Mike" goes along with the constant video-taping, performing "himself" with restrained good humour. The fact that he is probably straight and possibly oblivious to Kuchar's desire adds a dimension of sexual tension that the viewer shares with George at Mike's expense. After he leaves, Kuchar consoles himself with physique magazines, comparing his own shirtless pose to those of the models.

By privileging his own bodily processes, desires, and appearance, Kuchar crucially subverts the valorization of consciousness in avant-garde film. Compared to Mekas, his suffering is biological, not existential. The camera is explicitly situated as an extension of Kuchar's vision, but also of his body. In close-ups of food or of himself, the proximity of the profilmic to the lens is defined by the length of his reach. His practice of speaking while filming inscribes a highly personalized, and therefore possessive, voice-over commentary onto the imagery. As in all of Kuchar's videos, a profound sense of solitude is established, not only through his self-deprecating humour, but through the restricted field of vision and the mediated relation to the world. One effect of his physical identification with the camera is that every shot of another person becomes an encounter.

In almost all his video diaries Kuchar spies on people, whispering to the spectator as he points his camera at strangers outside his window. Within the tape's larger structure of comparative internal and external natural phenomena, the people in Oklahoma are aligned with the weather as "outside." In representing himself as a body rather than a subject, Kuchar's encounters with others, and with the larger cultural and physical environment, are consistently physical. His fellow Americans all become different than himself, but it is above all a difference of space and distance, relationships defined by motel architecture. Sometimes those differences are perceived as ideological, and when he decides his neighbours are Christians or hippies, Kuchar retreats further into the privatized space of the motel room.

Kuchar's journeys to rural American towns are modeled on ethnographic fieldwork, but he casually violates all the conventions of humanist anthropology. The Other becomes exotic and often threatening, but Kuchar himself becomes equally strange in the eyes of the Other. Kuchar's documentary subjects are his own first audience, as he makes himself, both on- and off-frame, a spectacle of equal magnitude. A circuit of looks, in which the viewer takes on the role of voyeur, is thereby completed. Like the hyperreality of the televised tornado, Kuchar's encounters with others are always exaggerated. His friendships are also presentations of those people to future audiences. It is by way of his own body and subjectivity that Kuchar presents one culture (rural Oklahoman) to another (urban artists and intellectuals). A couple of mainstream documentaries, *Sherman's March* (McElwee, 1987) and *Roger and Me* (Michael Moore, 1989), involve similar conceits of self-representation, but Kuchar's tapes differ in their spontaneity and banality. The extremely low production values of these diaries exaggerate their experiential quality, while thoroughly mediating it.

Comparing Kuchar's aesthetics to Mekas's, the video is ugly, with garish colours that emphasize the tackiness of everyday America. His use of video does not aestheticize, which enables us to understand Mekas's project as a process of redemption. Mekas transcends the alienating loss of experience by transforming

the experienced world into images; Kuchar inhabits a world of images, with no indication of a referential reality outside that sphere. He represents himself as an alien in his own country, someone who is always alone in a crowd. However, this alienation is inseparable from the fact that he always has a camera between himself and others. There is nothing "prior" to the making of the tape. As a postmodern form of autoethnography, it renders society as an image, or a televisual discourse, and poses the problem of identity through a location of "self" within image-culture.

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Another filmmaker who has used video to inscribe herself within a world of images is Sadie Benning.

In the late 1980s, Fisher Price put a children's video camera on the market that produced such a low definition image that it came to be known as Pixelvision. Except for extreme close-ups, the pixels of the digital image are readily visible, providing a highly mediated form of representation. The black and white image is framed by a thick black border when it is transferred onto half-inch video tape. Because Pixelvision is restricted to a level of close-up detail, it is an inherently reflexive

medium, and is especially appropriate to experimental ethnography. The "big picture" is always out of reach, as the filmmaker is necessarily drawn to the specificity of everyday life. (A number of film- and videomakers have used Pixelvision, most notably Peggy Ahwesh and Margie Strosser in their tape *Strange Weather* [1993], a documentary about crack-addicted teenagers in Florida.)³²



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Photo triptych of Sadie Benning

Benning's tapes suggest once again that identity is inscribed not only in history but in technologies of representation. Benning shoots most of her tapes in her bedroom, incorporating found footage, newspaper and magazine fragments, and written notes that pass in front of the camera like secret messages to the viewer. Each tape is scored by a selection of pop music, contextualizing the very personal stories within a cultural sphere. As a young lesbian, Benning's persona is constructed against the trappings of youth culture, media culture, and feminism. She performs herself by dressing up, wearing different wigs and makeup, and offering lingering close-ups of different parts of her face and body. Her first-person voice-over narration is confessional and poetic, rhetorical and playful, occasionally synchronized with her moving lips.

Benning uses Pixelvision as the language of youth, of a small voice. *A Place Called Lovely* (1991) is the tape that is most explicitly about childhood, and opens with some children's drawings, suggesting that Pixelvision is the technological equivalent of a primitivist style of representation. Made when she was eighteen, Benning assumes the voice of childhood, identifying with American children in general. She tells us about a seven-year-old classmate who grabbed her hair and chased her into an alley. She fights back at him, taking shots at the camera, but a scrawled note says she was still scared, and she cuts to a clip from *Psycho*. This memory is brought into close proximity with the present, collapsing the distance of the past. She tells a story about a man who tried to abduct her and she offers photos of schoolchildren over the sound of a music box. Then she talks about twenty-seven children who were found murdered in southwest Atlanta in 1979, showing pictures of black children, and concluding that "when these children died, every child died a little." While we should be somewhat sceptical of a white girl playing with a children's video camera in her bedroom "identifying" with these victims, Benning's perspective is a hybrid construction of innocence and cultural critique.

Benning's own image is in constant flux, appearing at times with her hair long and at others with it short and cropped. In the tape's longest sequence, she stands in front of an American flag while "America" plays, mimicking the emotional trajectory of the music with her face and hands, forcing a smile throughout the song. She follows this performance with a message saying, "That scared me too." If in other tapes she works with the contradictions of growing up gay, in this one she confronts the contradictions of being an American child. Benning is too media-savvy, and her imagery is too highly developed aesthetically for her naiveté to be believable, and so she creates a kind of constructed primitivism.³³ Her confessional first-person narration may or may not refer to "the truth" but she nevertheless uses autobiography as a domain of referentiality that works with and against the signs of American culture.

Benning's construction of her lesbian identity intersects with her youthfulness in an ongoing "coming out" diary that links the various videotapes.³⁴ *It Wasn't Love* is a tape dedicated to "bad girls everywhere." She poses with a girlfriend for the camera, dresses up like a boy, and tells a story about meeting a woman in Beverly Hills. She says, "We didn't need Hollywood; we were Hollywood," and indeed the tape is very much about playing adult games, 'putting on' a sexuality that is insinuated in pop music and blues songs. As autoethnography, Benning's tapes produce a subjectivity that evades authenticity. In this she shares something with a videomaker such as Richard Fung, about whom Jose Muñoz writes: "To perform queerness is to constantly disidentify; to constantly find oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly 'line up.' This is equally true of hybridity, another modality where meaning or identifications do not properly line up. The postcolonial hybrid is a subject who occupies a

space between the West and the rest."³⁵ Benning's position between childhood and adulthood shifts easily into a queer discourse that one critic has described as a "license." "It's a tape that refuses victimhood, sees desire as having its own integrity, and uses sex to carve out a sphere of freedom."³⁶ Benning's "party on the margins" uses collage in conjunction with the diary format to construct a hybrid identity that refuses to be pinned down. It is, moreover, flaunted as something she dreams up in her bedroom, drawn from the minimal resources of her body, her camera, and her collection of props, images, and music.

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The notion of hybridity is key to the diary film and video because it suggests how the multiple subject-effects of voice, vision, and body can produce new forms of subjectivity. Postcolonial subjects as well as other identities can potentially escape the limits of nation and gender. This implies a very different notion of "freedom" than the aesthetic of spontaneity advocated by Jonas Mekas and the *verité* diarists. In 1968 Jim McBride made a diary film that was also mainly shot in a bedroom, but *David Holzman's Diary* was a fake documentary, satirizing many of the tropes of cinema *verité's* discourses of honesty, confession, and truth. It circulated around a character/filmmaker named David Holzman whose self-indulgence was in fact a non-identity. His voyeurism masked a void of referentiality and a receding discourse of desires to know, possess, and see.

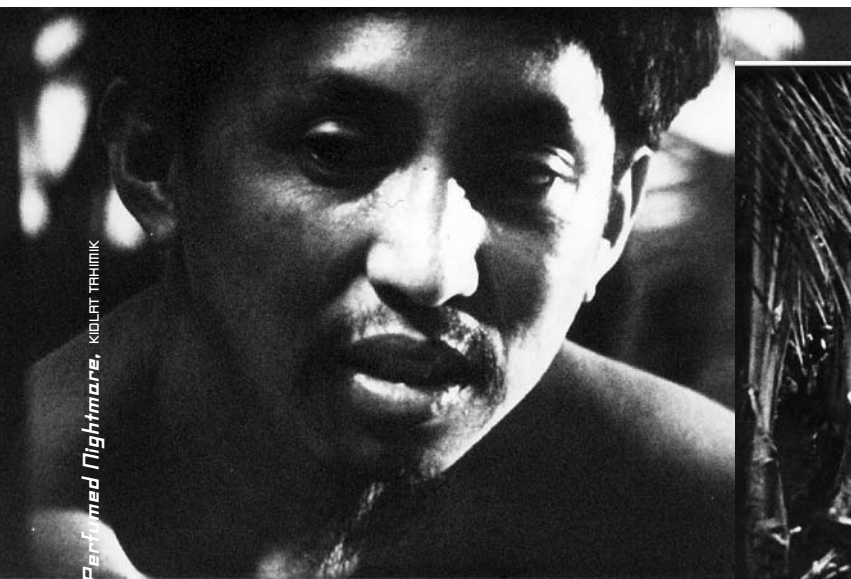
If diary filmmaking can no longer take the identity of the filmmaker for granted, identity becomes a site of contestation and negotiation. For a videomaker like Sadie Benning, the diary mode becomes a space of cultural transgression and critique, a site where she can become anyone she wants and is thus able to transcend any assigned roles of gender and age. Both Benning and Kuchar embrace video as a medium of consumer culture, working within the codes of home video as well as those of the avant-garde. Through an appropriation of television as a discourse of the quotidian, their diaries are means of constructing identities from the techniques of image-culture.³⁷

The journeys undertaken by Sadie Benning in her bedroom-studio-laboratory are propelled through the fragmentary discourses of popular culture. Her use of found footage refers only to herself as an ethnographic referent, a body whose sexuality, youth, and appearance are not fixed, but in transit among a plethora of intertexts. By fragmenting her body into the image-sphere of Pixelvision, she becomes completely textual, a constellation of effects that are quite removed from the verbally narrated "I," and from the name of the videomaker. In this way, she cannot be figured, herself, as a representative lesbian or a representative child. Although few other people appear in Benning's tapes, images of people—in magazines, in her stories, in her dressing-up, and in photographs—abound. As in Kuchar's tapes, people are perceived only through the mediating effects of the medium. The video camera is not an instrument or metaphor for

consciousness for either Kuchar or Benning, but a public sphere in which they represent themselves as effects of discourse.

Homi Bhabha has theorized postcolonial identity as a process of doubling, a "spatialization of the subject" in place of the "the symbolic consciousness" of Barthes, and, I would add, Visionary Cinema.³⁸ In their video diaries, Kuchar and Benning represent themselves as bodies in space. The camera as an instrument of vision serves as a means of making them visible, a vehicle for the performance of their identities. Bhabha argues that it is through this splitting of the self that the Other is understood as a part of oneself: "That disturbance of your voyeuristic look enacts the complexity and contradictions of your desire to see, to fix cultural difference in a containable, *visible* object. The desire for the Other is doubled by the desire in language, which splits the difference between Self and Other so that both positions are partial; neither is sufficient unto itself."³⁹ He goes on to suggest that "by understanding the ambivalence and the antagonism of the Other," by deconstructing the homogenization of the Other, "a celebratory, oppositional politics of the margins" will be possible.⁴⁰ I would argue that this is true not only of postcolonial identities, but also of queer and hybrid subjectivities that seek to represent themselves through an articulation of the gaze. Video provides a degree of proximity and intimacy that enables this spatialization of the body. Instead of a transcendental subject of vision, these videos enact the details of a particularized, partialized subjectivity.

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Kidlat Tahimik: Diary of a Third-World Filmmaker

Kidlat Tahimik is the filmmaker who has developed the diary film most extensively within a discourse of postcolonial cultural critique. His distinctive filmmaking technique pries apart the various levels of self-representation so that the primitive, the native, and the premodern are ironically constructed within a discursive bricolage centred around his own subjectivity. Although all his filmmaking, including his most well-known film, *Perfumed Nightmare* (1977), is autobiographical, the three-hour diary project *Why Is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?* (1981–93) is most explicitly so. The history in which the diary evolves is at once that of the Philippines, Tahimik's own family, and global processes of colonialism and neocolonialism. Incorporating found footage, newspaper headlines, tv broadcasts, home movies, travel footage, and documentation of public events and political demonstrations, the film is extraordinarily far-flung—to Germany and Monument Valley, to Magellan and Ferdinand Marcos—while consistently localized in Baguio, Tahimik's home town in the Philippines.

The episodic structure of *Why Is Yellow* is much like that of *Perfumed Nightmare*, which Fredric Jameson has described as a co-optation of "travelogue language." Tahimik's films are made for the Western film-festival market, but he is very conscious of his role as native informant, playing with it so as to foreground "the inauthenticity of the Western spectator."⁴¹ Documentary footage is mixed with scripted performances, and he continually reverses expectations of First- and Third-World cultural scenes. His movement between cultures casts him as an exemplary Inappropriate Other.

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As we have seen in the previous instances of diary filmmaking, the format tends to have three levels of self-representation, and Tahimik exploits each somewhat differently. His voice-over is written as a dialogue with his son Kidlat, who actually opens the work with a first-person account of accompanying his father to Germany and America at the age of about eight. Although Tahimik himself takes over most of the narration, this conceit allows Tahimik to frame his voice-over as words of wisdom to the next generation. The text delivers an unambiguous message about the spiritual superiority of native peoples, the dangers of industrialized modernity, and the economics of cultural imperialism.⁴² Tahimik's verbal message is, however, qualified by his vocation as an independent filmmaker and intellectual, married to a German woman and father of three children, two of whom are blonde. His speech, in other words, originates in a body that is fully part of industrialized modernity. His politicization of everyday life in what he refers to as the Third World is anything but a primitivist fantasy of identity, even while he champions the cause of native peoples.

Tahimik also inscribes himself on a second level, at the source of the documentary gaze, although his is always a fleeting look. He rarely looks very long at anyone, except his own children, at which point he assumes the role of the father in a domesticated mode of film production. The kaleidoscope of imagery also includes the work of other Philippine artists, his own installation works, performance pieces, and indigenous music. Because he cuts back and forth in time, incorporating so many fragments, and because he never shoots in synch, the film, like so many diary projects, is made in the editing room. Shots of him at the steenbeck are often used to link sections of the film so that the phenomenology of seeing is sublimated in an aesthetic of collecting.

Filmmaking, for Tahimik, is above all a craft, through which he can be aligned with pre-industrial modes of production. In his video *Takadera mon amour* (1989) he constructs a bamboo camera, and in *Why Is Yellow* he and his son build a "Third-World projector" out of rusted junk scavenged in Monument Valley. Its blurry, unstable image introduced at the opening of the diary film is the one that Tahimik embraces as his own vision, significantly aligned not with the subjective eye of the camera, but the public one of the projector.

Artistic process is represented very explicitly in *Why Is Yellow* as a Third-World model of recycling, low-tech bricolage. Tahimik carries out, perhaps more than any other filmmaker, Benjamin's theorization of the artist as producer, adopting the very techniques of the medium to a politicized content.⁴³ This extends even to his role as a performer, the third level of self-inscription: "The only way I can explain things is through my personal experiences, I'm confessing my own contradictions, so I have to throw myself in. It's also because I'm the only person available and willing to be filmed this way! The actor who is always on call!

And cheap too!"⁴⁴ *Why Is Yellow* includes a clip of Tahimik's first film experience, playing the "last savage Indian specimen" in Werner Herzog's *Kaspar Houser*, as well as clips from Tahimik's on-going work-in-progress, about Magellan's slave. By playing the role of the slave, Tahimik is able to offset his own postmodern mobility with a discourse of forcible travel and historical displacement, even if it is one that he manages to romanticize as a fiction of revenge and return.⁴⁵

Tahimik's performances throughout the diary place the authenticity of his experience in question, although his body remains a site of historical indexicality. Over the thirteen years the diary covers, Tahimik's physical appearance gradually changes from the pixieish *naif* of *Perfumed Nightmare* to a long-haired bohemian. As his image becomes doubled as both father and slave, its aging is intimately bound to the deepening understanding of this doubleness and its epistemological possibilities.

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In Jameson's analysis, Tahimik's critique of Western progress produces "something like cultural nationalism,"⁴⁶ and yet Tahimik's "Third-World energy" is not limited to the Philippines. Moreover, the story of Philippine political history that is told over the course of the film is not a solution to the problem of cultural imperialism. The euphoria of Cory Aquino's victory in 1986 gives way to the subsequent struggle for democracy in the post-Marcos years and the ongoing role of American mass culture in Tahimik's children's lives. Far from a "nationalism" though, he situates himself within the circuits of global capitalism through which First and Third worlds are inextricably linked.⁴⁷

John Ford's Point in Monument Valley is a site to which Tahimik frequently returns in *Why Is Yellow*. The footage he shot on his first trip in 1983 with his son becomes a memory, over which his return trips constitute layers of gradual degradation. In 1988 he finds his Navaho friends posing for tourists and keeping a generator in their hogan to watch westerns on tv. The desert is littered with junk, which Tahimik recycles as props. "John Ford's point," says Tahimik over a hollow tv set in the desert, "is that the only good Indian is a dead Indian." His role as the redeemer of native peoples is overtly romantic, and yet it is assumed as a search for something within postmodernity, not as a practice of salvage. Linking the Igorots in the Philippines with the Navaho is perhaps an essentialist ploy, and yet it is also a function of his assumed identity as Magellan's slave. His own name, Kidlat Tahimik, is an Igorot name that he originally gave to his character in *Perfumed Nightmare*, but later assumed for himself instead of his given Spanish name.⁴⁸

At one point in *Why Is Yellow* Tahimik visits a native community in the interior of the Philippine Cordillera, providing the film's most "ethnographic" footage of men building a dam by hand. His segue into this scene from political

demonstrations in Manila is an explanation to young Kidlat: "Native peoples join us in our call for justice for Ninoy [Aquino] but they are more concerned with the loss of their ancestral lands, just like the Native Americans. Kidlat, we have a lot to learn from our Igorot brothers." In the film's only talking head interview, Lopes Na-uyac explains that because the government in Manila treats them only as tourist attractions, the Igorot have to build bridges without government engineering. Bridges made out of vines and scrap metal Coke signs are supplemented by dams to provide water deep enough for saving lives. This passage is indicative of Tahimik's admiration for native ingenuity and efficient management of resources. In his transformation of the salvage paradigm, ethnography remains linked to memory, but not to vanishing cultures. It is his own memory that structures his ethnography, as his family grows up and he can edit his own experiences in the form of flashbacks. Memory in this diary is not a discourse of loss, but of a layering of cultural forms.

The colonization of the Philippines first by the Spanish, and then by the Americans, situates Igorot culture as a repressed identity that Tahimik attempts to recover not as an authentic indigenous culture, but as a constituency in post-modernism. The eruption of Mt. Pinatubo becomes a metaphor for the cultural layering and smothering that the film documents, and an earthquake in Baguio finally isolates the filmmaker from his son now away in university. Towards the end of the diary, young Kidlat is behind the video camera, so if the film spends an inordinate amount of time with Tahimik's children, it also finally allows the son to make the transition from ethnographic subject to ethnographer. The primitivism of children is thus a temporary condition, subject, like native peoples, to the transience of history.

Tahimik's collage is above all an aesthetics of ruins, recycling the surplus waste of commodity culture. The discourse of ethnography in his filmmaking is a form of memory that encompasses the "radical forgetting" of found footage, but also embodies it as a form of experience. The autoethnographic self is a performance of the primitive, through which Tahimik mobilizes the avant-garde as a mode of allegorical ethnography. One technique that Tahimik shares with Sadie Benning and several other American avant-garde filmmakers such as Su Friedrich and Peggy Ahwesh is the use of toys and models. The little cars and trucks that Tahimik borrows from his kids serve as another form of "acting out" and "playing primitive."

Children's toys are in some respects the emblematic waste of consumer culture, made of non-biodegradable materials for temporary use. Recycling toys as props in films is a means of recalling childhood in a strictly allegorical form, a form in which the signifier itself has a material history. Tahimik's use of toys is like his use of found images and headlines. They are allegorical in their doubleness,

to which he gives an economic rationale: don't let anything go to waste. The excess of the First World is the condition of life in the Third, and he aims for a Third-World aesthetic that would recast the ethnographic as an allegory of the subject. He produces a subjectivity which is consistently double, inappropriate and hybrid, signified by the body of the Other, a body which is inauthentic, textual, ironic, transnational. Appropriation is an economics, an aesthetic, and an identity.

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Echoing Mekas's role in New York, Tahimik is very active in the art-world of the Philippines, having established a film collective in Baguio, and his identity as a filmmaker is as important as his ethnicity. If this is a subtext of the diary film in general, Tahimik transforms it into a global, intercultural identity. On the way to Monument Valley in 1983, he meets Dennis Hopper and goes to a film conference run by Francis Ford Coppola where *Perfumed Nightmare* is playing. Cinema, for Tahimik, is not a means of freedom from cultural imperialism, but provides a language in which he can inscribe himself as a dispersed and multiple subject. Instead of Mekas's nostalgia, Tahimik's cinema represents history as a text in which his own experience is one discourse among many. Neither history nor identity are fixed entities, but are under continual revision. About his Magellan project, unfinished for lack of a galleon in which to shoot it, he says, "History is not the monopoly of cultures who have books and computers, who can store it in their archives. So I imagine a lot of the material from the slave's point of view..."⁴⁹ Like Magellan's Igorot slave, the "first man to circumnavigate the globe," Tahimik is himself a construct of multiple languages, cultures, memories, and desires made possible by the techniques of cinematic bricolage.

In the 1993 Yamagita Film Festival catalogue, Tahimik lists subsequent installments of the diary up to the year 2001. However, in 1994 he said the film would stop at the earthquake because "I got insecure about my wife's criticism of the film as my ego-trip,"⁵⁰ a statement that says much about the family dynamics behind Tahimik's home-movie practice. The contradictions of a globe-trotting father are implicit in Katrin de Guia's relative absence from the film. Her performance at the end of *Perfumed Nightmare* of giving birth in the back of a jeepney (a Philippine taxi made out of recycled U.S. army vehicles) to the "first Kidlat born on the other side of the planet" (Germany) suggests the limits of Tahimik's global perspective. His historical passages from slave to master and from father to son remain inscribed within a gendered discourse that writes women out of the picture. Within Tahimik's postmodern, postcolonial voyage, there lurk many remnants of a modernist exilic discourse, and yet he does not yearn for a lost authenticity or a vanishing reality. He constructs a subjectivity within a material history of colonial history. As a collage of identities "embodied" in the Filipino filmmaker, ethnicity is thoroughly deconstructed into a plethora of fantasies, memories, and histories.

Film, Video, Memory and the Millennium

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These examples of personal filmmaking suggest some of the contradictions implicit in the notion of autoethnography. The subject "in history" will always be a destabilized self, one for whom memory and experience are always separate. Even a diaristic project like George Kuchar's, in which there is no apparent break between experience and representation, inscribes subjectivity as a form of writing, a performance of the self. The journeys undertaken by these film- and videomakers suggest the possible ethnographic effects of placing oneself under scrutiny. Autoethnography produces a subjective space that combines anthropologist and informant, subject and object of the gaze, under the sign of one identity.

Sadie Benning's use of Pixelvision and Kidlat Tahimik's epic home-movies are means by which they perform not only themselves, but a visual style that signals their difference. Moreover, the ironic tone of all the narrators signals a distance from the authenticity of images, and from the authenticity of the self. Jonas Mekas plays out the fundamentally allegorical structure of autoethnography, transforming all images into memories, traces of experience, signs of the past to be salvaged in cinematic form. Through irony, each of the other filmmakers are able to inscribe themselves in the future as another moment in time, and to understand the fiction of the past as a "cosmic innocence." Each of these filmmakers comes to understand how they themselves can exist in "a world of appearances," as Chris Marker puts it in *Sans Soleil*, another diary/travelogue/ethnographic and autobiographical film. Their identities as film- and video-makers enable them to reach back to a material reality that precedes images, a domain of agency and history.

Autoethnography in film and video exemplifies Fischer's recognition of the autobiographical model of ethnography, but also suggests an expanded sense of the term "ethnic." The full scope of identities that are articulated in the new autobiographies include sexual orientation, class, generation, and nation. As personal cinema becomes the foundation of cultural critique, "ethnicity" becomes something forged from experience and is reconfigured as a vital form of knowledge. And as Fischer argues in the context of literary autoethnography, diary filmmaking serves as an important model of ethnographic representation appropriate to a pluralist social formation. These films and videos suggest how the audio-visual medium of the cinema functions as a means of splitting and fragmenting identity, not only into the parallel tracks of sound and image, but within the status of the image itself. If "ethnicity" refers to an inherited identity, a fixed history of the self, autoethnography in film and video destabilizes and disperses that history across a range of discursive selves.

When autoethnography becomes an archival practice, as it does in these works, memory is fragmented into a nonlinear collage. The pieces that are assembled into the shape of a diary forsake the authenticity of documentary realism for a fiction of forgetting. The filmed memory situates the filmmaker-subject within a culture of mediation in which the past is endemically fictional. To recall that past by way of memory is to render it "another culture" in an ever receding palimpsest of overlapping cultures, of which past, present, and future are merely points of perspective. Subjectivity subsists within image culture as an "other reality," a utopian space where hierarchies of vision, knowledge, and desire are diffused and collapsed. The journey to this parallel universe is linear neither in time nor in space, moving across histories and geographies to produce a dialectics of cultural representation. Benjamin suggested the urgency of such a practice in the early 1930s: "The remembered world breaks up more quickly, the mythic in it surfaces more quickly and crudely, [so] a completely remembered world must be set up even faster to oppose it. That is how the accelerated pace of technology looks in the light of today's pre-history."⁵¹

The video-film dialogue that informs so much contemporary filmmaking inscribes the "accelerated pace of technology" into the text itself, setting up allegories of cultural conflict, tension, and transition within the sphere of memory and its representation. In the cinema, self-representation always involves a splitting of the self, a production of another self, another camera, another time, another place. Video threatens to collapse the temporal difference of filmic memory, not only because it can eliminate the structure of secondary revision, but because of its "coverage," its capacity as an instrument of surveillance. The economics of videography transform the collecting process into one of recording. Video lacks the death drive of film, unable to exploit the dialectic of still and motion photography. But neither can video "forget" film and its auratic fantasy of transparency, its memory of the (celluloid) body in the machine.

In its immediacy, without that intermediary "liminal" phase of the photographic negative, video threatens the structures of memory on which autobiographical conventions are founded. The video image shifts the terms of realism from lost aura to an eclipse of auratic memory, or at least it holds out the possibility of such a transformation. Self-representation likewise shifts into something much more fluid and open, discursive and intertextual, even fictional and fantastic.



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TAPE DESCRIPTIONS [George Kuchar](#)

[next >>>](#)

Sherman Acres 1991
about 85 minutes.

The complete series is in 6 episodes and is a drama which entails psychological breakdowns, marital showdowns and messy obsessions. The characters include a wayward priest, a promiscuous school-teacher and her proctologist husband, teen-age thrill killers and an obsession driven psychotherapist with an enema bag. There's lots of special effects and it moves pretty fast from one major crisis to another.

Gastronomical Get-away... 1991

16 minutes

Mono Lake and Yosemite Valley in California highlight this excursion into the ~~congested~~ constipated crevices of once highly active fumeroles that splattered magma and chunks of hot rock onto the Western landscape.

Now the vents are blocked by eating disorders that rob our nation of its free flowing and fertilizing heritage.

We follow a woman as she sinks into a dark, inland sea of great natural beauty... unable to deposit her own organic pile onto the rich mineral build-up that reaches skyward toward the creator ~~that~~ ^{who} dreamt up this exquisite landscape.

Winter Hostilities... 1991
about 15 minutes

The ground is frozen and the whiteness hides the carcass of a ~~thing~~ ^{thing} that once ~~was~~ ^{was} happy... but now maybe ~~was~~ had gotten gassed by things undigested.

The bones of once mighty, and blubbery beings stand erect among midgets or dangle around the necks of dormant cannibals destined for a like-wise extinction and yet, there is hope: As long as there is still a little meat in those bones our appetite for living goes on.

Weather Watch..1991
about 15 minutes

A window or two on the outside world is not enough especially when you have such a lousy view of things as I had in this Oklahoma, residential care home. The majesty of the console model TV gave a new dimension to the concept of time and space and shrunk it all down to a 21 inch lump of nature; a 21 incher that didn't smell and permeate the ~~atmosphere~~ atmosphere with discomfort. A meditation on the elsewhere and wanting to be there.



Ashley, ANIMAL CHARM

Being surrounded by mass-produced objects induces a kind of panic. How can I fix my relationship to an object when it is not one, but many? The object is schizophrenic and polygamous. This is not my lover's favourite cup/ashtray/lamp, though it is identical to it in every way. Significance bleeds from one object to another: impostor objects evoke authentic memories. My alarm clock, with which I have developed a complex set of relations involving memory, sentiment, and identification ("This is MY alarm clock") is the replica of an alarm clock which many thousands of people the world over possess. What is the relationship that all of us share? Our possessions are interchangeable and commit infidelities.¹

American Psycho[Drama]: Sigmund Freud vs. Henry Ford

Nelson Henricks

A selection of American performance-based video works at the end of the 1990s describes a trajectory between consumer society and the psycho-analytic confessional. Emphatically low-tech and comedic, the works of HalfLifers, Emily Breer and Joe Gibbons, Anne McGuire, and Animal Charm use mass-produced phenomena as a springboard for social critique. HalfLifers (Torsten Z. Burns and Anthony Discenza) act out panicked rescue missions using everyday objects. Breer and Gibbons' *The Phony Trilogy* (and Gibbons' solo "Barbie" series) target pop culture icons through delusional monologues. Anne McGuire mimics popular television genres, interrupting the comfortable flow of power within them.

Unlike the other artists, Animal Charm (Richard Earl Bott Jr. and James Whitney Fetterly) use found footage instead of performance to reveal the

madness in mass culture. By re-editing images derived from a wide variety of sources, they scramble media codes, creating a kind of tic-ridden, convulsive babble. Animal Charm's strategy is, however, consistent with the other works, and even sums up the overriding ethos of these productions: the disruptive gestures can reinvest conventional forms with subversive meanings. The work of these artists can be set into orbit around three points: performance, television, and madness. In doing so, we can perhaps shed some light on the state of the American video at the end of the '90s.

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Ashley, ANIMAL CHARM

Performance, Television, and Madness

Like their young British counterparts, these recent American productions recall the low-tech, performance-based works of the 1970s.² They distinguish themselves from their historic predecessors through the deployment of specific types of humour. Comedy, of course, played an important role in early video work.³ In the '90s, however, humour can be defined more pointedly as either stand-up comedy or slapstick. Physical comedy focuses on the body under duress; the gap between Chris Burden and Buster Keaton is perhaps not as broad as some would like to imagine.⁴ Stand-up comedy, on the other hand, is a first-person narrative employing humour to disseminate didactic information. Lenny Bruce and Laurie Anderson are two performers who blur the boundary between comedy and art, and whose work contains political or social commentary.

Not coincidentally, stand-up and slapstick are the two types of humour most commonly used in television, which brings us to the second feature that distinguishes these videos from those of the 1970s. Instead of long duration and slow pacing, these videos freely adopt the pacing and syntax of tv. Television syntax is used as a kind of *lingua franca*, a shared literacy which each of these artists exploit to communicate their ideas. What is important to stress here is that television is not the primary subject of these works, nor is it treated in a critical manner.⁵ Instead, it is viewed as a cultural fact, an inevitability, a backdrop against which all activities take place.

It is probably unnecessary to state that television, both the material object and its videotaped content, is a product of mass culture.⁶ Mass-produced phenomena all figure into the work of these artists, whether it is junk and junk food (HalfLifers), pop icons (Breer/Gibbons), television genres (McGuire)

or information on videotape (*Animal Charm*). What I feel is significant is that each of the artists performs a kind of madness for the video camera, a madness catalyzed through an encounter with mass-produced/multiple objects. In an informal conversation I had recently with Joan Braderman, she remarked that fear was the primary factor which distinguished contemporary performance-based works from those of the '70s.⁷ Bearing this in mind, perhaps what we are witnessing in these works is neither fear nor madness, but instead anxiety. What do we have to be anxious about at the end of the '90s? The eradication of nature? The failure of the body? Global economic collapse? The millennium? Or is it just the simple fear of losing our individuality? This is not just the fear of becoming a fashion victim, of being forced to conform to the will of society. It is the fear of becoming isolated from political agency, the fear of being powerless as an individual in a society where the only viable mode of expression left is to consume.

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When we watch the president of the United States announce on television that bombing has started in Africa, in the Middle East, or in Europe, we feel far from the truth. Behind the television screen, truth is being constructed for mass consumption; disparate information is made to harmonize into seamless waves of soothing discourse. If recent independent video work describes a complex interweaving of fear, madness, and anxiety, we should perhaps identify madness as a viable response to anxiety, an act of disruptive resistance, a refusal to be serenitized.⁸

Perhaps the most appropriate response to mass culture is multiple personality. Not necessarily a disorder, but instead, a disruptive gesture.⁹ Many of these artist/performers seem to be caught in delusional states where they become someone else. This is not the same as acting. In theatre, the persona is free of fissures. Here the spectacle is disrupted by the artist whom we see performing as themselves (a self-reflexive trait which owes much to the tradition of performance art). We can talk about this in terms of "low-tech," but we can also see it as a kind of self-reflexivity—a Brechtian distantiation technique which renders the performance visible even as it is being performed. As was the case for Brecht's theatre works, these videotaped performances function as a kind of experimental agitation-propaganda that uses humour to make difficult ideas easier to swallow.¹⁰

Control Corridor, HALIFERS



HalfLifers

alfLifers is a collaborative project of Torsten Z. Burns and Anthony Discenza. In their work, they perform rescue missions. One such



work, *Actions in Action* (1997), is packaged like an adventure show. For ten minutes, the HalfLifers' attempt to "rescue" one another (à la Kipper Kids) by applying yogurt, junk food, syrup, processed cheese, and baloney slices to each other's bodies.¹¹ The footage, based on hours of improvisation, is then accelerated so that all the actions are performed at high speed. The performers squeak out dramatic exclamations in hysterical cartoon voices: "Do you feel anything? Is this working?" The scene is like something out of *"ER on acid"*—as one technique begins to rescue the subject, it quickly fails, and another cure is needed to supplant it.¹²

If *Actions in Action* evokes the failure of the body, medicine, and memory, *Control Corridor* (1997) focuses on communication failure. Here the HalfLifers act out something resembling a space shuttle docking procedure using a number of disparate objects (toys, a telephone, motorcycle helmets, and other junk) as surrogates for high-end communications technology. Ironically, what HalfLifers communicate is never more substantial than the panicked fact of communicating for its own sake: "I'm in! Are you in? I'm in. All right, I can hear you...I can also see you...." While mobile phones, fax machines, voice-mail, and e-mail offer the promise of immediate communication and increased productivity, what they create is anxiety. Like kids role-playing for future disasters in the safety of their parents' rumpus room, HalfLifers reduce the chaos of daily life to a smaller, more ordered, scale.¹³



Joe Gibbons and Emily Breer

Role-playing as performed by the HalfLifers takes the backseat to outright delusion in Joe Gibbons and Emily Breer's *The Phony Trilogy* (1997). Combining digital animation with real-time performance, this series of shorts recounts Gibbons' fictional influence on Brian Wilson (*Pool Boy*), Iggy Pop (*Caddy*), and Francis Ford Coppola (*The Horror*). Though at first Gibbons' monologues read as conventional stand-up routines, their undercurrent is aggressive and grandiose, verging on paranoid: Wilson and Coppola are "stealing" his ideas, while Iggy is offering to trade places with him. These fantasies, depicted in Breer's disorienting and hallucinatory animations, stand in sharp contrast to the characters' actual social position: pool boy, caddy, and shell-shocked Vietnam vet. Gibbons is not just working class, but serving class. Illusions of class mobility are propagated through tantalizing fantasies of fame, yet in reality, they remain nothing more than this.

In his solo *Multiple Barbie* (1998), Gibbons plays a smooth-talking psychoanalyst, gently attempting to unite a mute doll's multiple personalities. Part of a series of tapes on Barbie™ shot in Pixelvision™, *Multiple Barbie* presents the audience with the double bind of Gibbons-as-psychiatrist versus Gibbons-as-madman. Are we witnessing a doll narrative, as some suspension of disbelief would permit us to assume? Or are we instead watching a lunatic act out his own multiple personality, provoked by and channelled through the plastic husk of a Barbie doll? Gibbons' performance—relentless in its intensity—allows us to flip-flop from one extreme to the other, leaving us with no sense of stability. *Multiple Barbie* and *The Phony Trilogy* speak in a very charged manner of the relationships we forge with the multiple, yet not ideologically neutral, cultural icons that surround us.



Anne McGuire

In the work of Anne McGuire, the mass-produced “object” is not a physical entity, but instead a series of genre conventions derived from television (the variety show, the talk show, and the rock video). McGuire's screen presence amplifies the sense of the uncanny that lies at the heart of familiar forms, creating a vertigo that is (like Gibbons') both humorous and disquieting.

In *I'm Crazy and You're Not Wrong* (1997) McGuire portrays a Kennedy-era singer performing cabaret songs that careen from pathetic to pathological. Recalling the concert performances of Judy Garland, McGuire uses her beautiful voice to “improvise” a series of songs over a slurring, distorted orchestral accompaniment. In the video, McGuire evokes a vertiginous double bind: is she figuratively crazy like Patsy Cline or stark raving-mad like Charles Manson? The madwoman as a stereotype in popular music (most recently personified by Björk) comfortably conflates power and instability. What McGuire does is undo the sutures that bind these discontinuous notions together.

The Telling (1994/98) shows McGuire telling two acquaintances a secret about her past using a three camera set-up in the Desi Arnez style. That intimacy is commodified in the form of a talk show isn't the strangest thing about this work. The fractured editing, silences, and lapses in continuity suggest vast narratives far more evocative than anything revealed

on screen. McGuire uses television vernacular to open up ambiguity and discomfort, two things that television strives to elude at all costs.

In the six-minute one-take video *When I Was a Monster* (1996) McGuire is seen recuperating from an accident. She is naked, seated before the camera. A series of metal pins (for setting broken bones) emerges from her left forearm. As the video progresses, she mimes a series of "monsters" to a relentlessly slow version of the B-52s' "Dance This Mess Around." Functioning like a home-made music video, McGuire presents the female body as simultaneously erotic and monstrous. Or is it erotic precisely because it is monstrous? McGuire explores the complicity of voyeurism and exhibitionism, elaborating upon similar body-centred works of the '70s.¹⁴



Animal Charm

Animal Charm (a collaborative project of Richard Earl Bott Jr. and James Whitney Fetterly), participates in video's rich legacy of media deconstruction. Their interventions—distillations of music videos, commercials, and info-mercials sampled from a reservoir of neglected or useless images—offer moments of resistance.

If you took this text and scrambled the word order, you would still have a sense of what it was about. But if you took a magazine article on physics, a chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, or instructions on how to apply cosmetics and merged them together, what would happen? This is precisely what Animal Charm do with television footage.¹⁵ By composting tv and reducing it to a kind of babble, they force television to not make sense. While this disruption is playful, it also reveals an overall "essence" of mass culture that would not be apprehended otherwise. Works such as *Stuffing*, *Ashley*, and *Lightfoot Fever* upset the hypnotic spectacle of tv viewing, in turn revealing how advertising creates anxiety, how culture constructs "nature," how conventional morality is dictated through seemingly neutral images, and so on. By forcing television to babble like a raving lunatic, we might finally hear what it is actually saying.



Ashley, ANIMAL CHARM

NELSON HENRICKS Psycho[Drama]

Psycho[Drama]

It is commonly assumed that Rosalind Krauss's "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" tells us that video is a self-centred, egotistical medium.¹⁶ I think the most intriguing idea to be gleaned from Krauss's text is this: that video's most significant essential characteristic is its ability to explore psychological states. Narcissism, sure, but what about voyeurism, sadism, and masochism? What about fear, anxiety, paranoia, madness? If madness here is taken as a disruptive gesture which sets out to unbalance North American society's will towards homogeneity and control through consumption, these works testify to the power of individual gestures to create brief, and sometimes hilarious, moments of transcendence.



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All Smiles and Sadness

Anne McGuire

I am lonely, oh so lonely, I am all alone today
no one waiting, though I'm praying,
some one waits for me today, as though floating

—I'm only my heart today.

I imagine she imagines that I love her
every day. Is that really it, baby?

I'm sorry, but butlers are so often alone
in the house, and where is the love?
Where is the love? Oh where is the love?





Tell me where to look. Below? Above.
I search for this impossible love, I look up
when it's down, below, it's above.

it grows like these flowers, and yet again, not at all.
I look in the spring when love's waiting for fall.
—so stop looking.

She's in there doing god knows what. I wish
she'd get the hell out of there, she's driving me
crazy crazy crazy. So how are you?

How is Millie and Jimmy
and Sally and Sue? Well, Millie's gone away
each year she goes to the same place
but doesn't tell us where or why. She's up and gone.
And when will she be back? I don't know.
I'm not allowed to know where she's been. Oh,
there she is now. Hello, how are you?
The rains are here, the rains are here.
They've come yet again, there's nothing to fear.
Sleep, sleep, that's why the rains are here
To lull you to sleep, to calm your fear.
The rains are here, lay down your head





my sweet little dear. So, what's wrong
with my wife? Oh, there's nothing wrong with me.
It's too early to tell yet but I'd say for now:

Hot one add two, see shoe, mix walk, pad is fad, she's mad.
Yet she's all smiles and sadness, they say
as true as the love that inspires us to

walk blind through the light and go searchin'
all night for something so sad, so blue.
Dear, will you help me to the bathroom?



Excuse us. Please madam, let me take your cloak.
I'm sorry I've been so distressed.

I'm just a lowly butler, you know you can tell me. Is

madam all right? Sitting here wishing we're
and we're not. Killing time, it's dead at nine
and we're not. The king of stop

On his walk. Can smoke. And still talk. Winking
on top. What's going on? A little less
sad a little more mad, this is how I saw

the thing I thought we had. On a cool eve
in a far away place a girl sits in an old stone house
on an old green couch with gold threads running



through the upholstery. She's covered by an afghan
of multicolors. She hears cows and dogs and is afraid
of the house itself and its scary cold basement,

not much more than a root-cellar.

I thought she was mine, her and her damn house.
There, the dead end, I have come to it,

reddened, my blood rushing to my face, and you see it.
My emotions can't be deadened, not even by time.
Distance wouldn't idle me either.



Lookin' for you my love, lookin' for you, that's all I do
the whole day through is go lookin' for you, my love.
Sadness they say is true as love that inspires us to

walk blind through the light and go searchin' all night
for something so painful it's blue.

How is it done? Love found and won to last for long

and cause a song, what is happy and sweet?

When shall I meet a man who inspires this in me?

Have you ever experienced sadness and shame

at the meaninglessness and unimportance of a name?

The way it rings no bells when spoken?

The way you seem to read on the wall



the lettering that says nobody seems to know
your name at all unless you say it loudly,
unless you say it loudly and scream it out

like a dead man passing away into the air or maybe
like a man talkin' to a Dutch woman but forget
the Dutch woman, how about a German woman?

Scream it out loudly that name is your name
trapped in your soul forever trapped in there
like a pebble trapped in the beak of a bird.



Because it goes too high the bird it goes too high
to hear you callin' out, scream out your name!
Just a pebble swallowin' that's all I do

is swallow pebbles and I want to digest them
but it sticks in my throat—it's like chokin' me.
It's just a small pebble. I'm just a small bird too.

And I'm lost and I'm lonely and yes, you do know
that feeling:
You gonna make fun of me?





ACROSS, GARY MORTON

Women, Nature, and Chemistry: Hand-Processed Films from the Film Farm

Janine Marchessault

The representation of nature has been a central and longstanding aesthetic preoccupation in Canadian art and iconography. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in a series of films that have emerged from Philip Hoffman's hand-processing film workshop located on a forty-acre farm in southern Ontario. Since 1994, the films coming out of this summer retreat have been remarkable in terms of the consistency of their themes and innovative aesthetic approaches. One finds here a new generation of women experimental filmmakers exploring the boundaries between identity, film, chemistry, and nature.

The creative context for these films is no doubt shaped by the experimental films and critical concerns of Hoffman and his late partner, Marian McMahon. Since the late '80s, both Hoffman and McMahon were interested in autobiography, film (as) memory, and pedagogy. Hoffman, weary of overseeing large classes and high-end technologies at film school, conceived of a different pedagogical model for teaching film production. Instead of the urban, male dominated and technology heavy atmosphere, the Independent Imaging Workshop would be geared towards women and would feature hand-processing techniques in a low-tech nature setting. The process encouraged filmmakers to explore the environment through film, and to explore film through different chemical processes. The result is a number of beautiful short films that are highly personal, deeply phenomenological and often surreal. *Dandelions* (Dawn Wilkinson, 1995), *Swell* (Carolynne Hew, 1998), *Frogligh* (Sarah Abbott, 1997), *Fall and Scratch* (Deirdre Logue, 1998), *Across* (Cara Morton, 1997), and *We Are Going Home* (Jennifer Reeves, 1998) are among the most striking, recalling some of Joyce Wieland's most artisanal works and the psychic intensity of Maya Deren's "trance" films.

By artisanal I do not mean the aesthetic effect of "home made" movies produced by the uneven colouration of hand processing and tinting techniques. I am referring to the process of making films that is embedded in the final effect; that is, the work of film. Joyce Wieland's work was often characterized as artisanal, a term that in the '60s and '70s was the opposite of great art. Famously, she made films on her kitchen table, bringing a history of women's work to bear on her productions. In a video document of the Film Farm three women sit at a kitchen table in a barn discussing the varying and unpredictable results of processing recipes: the thickness of the emulsion, the strength of the solutions, the degree of agitation, not to mention air temperature and humidity. Out of the lab and into the kitchen (or barn), film production moves into the realm of the artisan and the amateur which, as Roland Barthes once observed, is the realm of love. This is the home of the experimental in its originary meaning, of finding what is not being sought, of being open to living processes and to chance.

Like Wieland, this new generation of filmmakers is exploring the relationship between bodies, the materiality of film stocks and the artifacts of the world around them. The simple images of nature (daisies, fields, frogs, trees, rivers, clouds, and so on) and rural architectures (bridges, barns, roads, etc.) are exquisite in their different cinematic manifestations. This is not idealized or essentialist nature, rather the landscapes are grounded in an experience of place. In Dawn Wilkinson's *Dandelions* for example, the filmmaker speaks of her relation to her birthplace and to home: "I am Canadian." As the only black child growing up in a rural town in Ontario, she was frequently asked, "Where are you from?" As she tells us about her experiences of being connected to nature while not being

included in the history of a nation, we see her with dandelions in her hair; she films her various African keepsakes in the landscape; we follow her bare feet on a road and later, she does cartwheels across fields. The montage of images is delicately rhythmic, and is accompanied by a monologue directed at an imaginary audience: "Where are YOU from?...I was born here." Like so many of the films produced at the workshop, the film explores the relation between the natural landscape and social identity.

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Several of the films display quite literally a desire to inscribe personal identity and history onto or, in the case of Carolynne Hew's *Swell*, into the landscape. In *Swell*, Hew, lying on a pile of rocks, begins to place the stones over her body. The film is structured by a movement from the city into the country, but the simple opposition is undone by both the filmmaker's body and film processes. The quick montage of black and white city images (Chinatown, bodies moving on the street, smoke, cars), accompanied on the soundtrack by a cement drill, is replaced by feet on rocks, strips of film blowing in the wind and beautifully tinted shots of yarrow blooms. There is no attempt here at a pristine nature, at representing a nature untouched by culture. Rather, the film is about the artist's love of nature, her sensual desire to be in nature. Shots of her face over the city are replaced with images of nature over her body; yarrow casts detailed shadows on her thigh, a symphony of colours abounds—orange, blue and fuschia. Strands of film hang on a line and Hew plays them with her scissors as one would a musical instrument. The sounds of nature—crickets, bees, water—are strongly grounded in the sound of her own body, breathing and finally a heartbeat. There are no words in this film but everything is mediated through language and through the density of the filmmaker's perception and imagination. The film is laid to rest on a beautiful rock as she scratches the emulsion with scissors; the relation between film and nature is dialectical. Nature here is both imagined (hand processed) and experienced. It is impossible to separate the two.

Deirdre Logue's two short and deceptively simple films, *Fall* (1997) and *Scratch* (1998), also convey the filmmaker's physical insertion into nature. This time the experience is not sensual release, but rather a sadomasochistic and painful journey. In *Fall*, Logue falls (faints?) over and over again from different angles and in different natural locations to become one, in a humorous and bruised way, with the land. In *Scratch*, she is more explicit about the nature of her images as we read: "My path is deliberately difficult." Facing the camera, she puts thistles down her underpants, and pulls them out again. The sounds of breaking glass as well as the crackle of film splices are almost the only sounds heard in this mostly silent film. Intercut are found footage images from an instructional film; we see a bed being automatically made and unmade, glass breaking and plates smashed. This film is sharp and painful. Logue, beautifully butch in her appearance, is anything but "natural"; it is clear that the nature she is self-inflicting

is the nature of sex. Her body is treated like a piece of emulsion—processed, manipulated, scratched, cut to fit. What is left ambiguous is whether the source of self-inflicted pain results from going against a socially prescribed nature or embracing a socially deviant one.

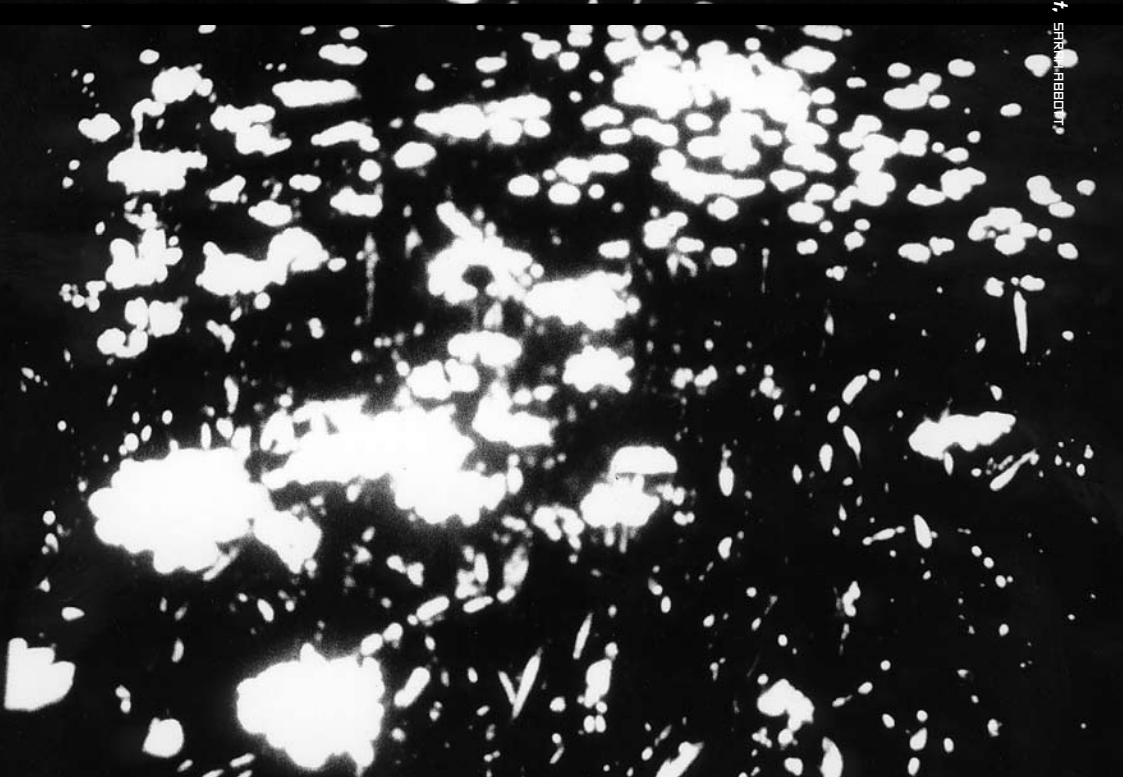
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Sarah Abbott's *Froglight* (1997) is even more ambiguous than either *Swell* or *Scratch* in terms of the nature of nature. The film opens with the artist's voice over black leader: "I am walking down the road with my camera but I can't see anything." A tree comes into focus as she tells us, "But I know I am walking straight towards something, we always are." For Abbott there is something that exceeds the image, that exceeds her thinking about nature. She experiences a moment standing in a field, a moment that cannot be reduced to an image or words; she "experiences something that is not taught," she does not want to doubt this experience because "life would be smaller." Abbott touches the earth, we hear the sound of her footsteps, we see a road, we hear frogs, and later we come upon a frog at night. In the narration, which is accompanied by the sound of frogs, Abbott attempts to put into words the idea of an experience that is beyond language, the idea that the world is much more than film, than the artist's own imaginings. Like the soundtrack, the film's black and white images are sparse. A magnifying glass over grass makes the grass less clear and is the film's central phenomenological drive: surfaces reveal nothing of what lies beneath. Towards the end of the film, a long held shot of wild flowers blowing in the wind is accompanied by Abbott's voice-over: "A woman gave me a sunflower before I came to make this film, and someone asked if it was my husband as I held it in my arm." The ambiguity of this statement foregrounds the randomness of signs (flower, husband) and language. *Froglight* affirms a nature that is mysterious and unknowable, a world of spiritual depth and creative possibility.

What first struck me about so many of the films coming out of the workshop is the tension between the female self/body and nature; each film is in some way an exploration of the filmmaker's relation to the land as place by cartwheeling, walking, or falling on it, and in the last two films that I want to comment on, swimming and dreaming through it. Women's bodies in Jenn Reeves' *We Are Going Home* and Cara Morton's *Across* are not only placed in nature but in time. Temporality exists on two planes in all of the hand-processed films I have been discussing, not only in terms of the images of a nature that is always changing but also in terms of film stocks and chemicals that continue to work on the film through time. Where workprints serve to protect the original negative from the processes of post-production, the films produced at the workshop use reversal stock and thus include the physical traces of processing and editing, an intense tactility that will comprise the final print of the film. This is what gives these films their temporal materiality and sensuality. In *We Are Going Home* and *Across* this temporality is narrativized and it is perhaps fitting that both films experiment



Froglight. SPIN. ABBOTT





We Are Going Home, JEFF TIFER REEVES



more extensively with advanced film techniques such as time-lapse cinematography, solarization, single-frame pixelation, split toning and tinting, superimpositions, optical printing and so on. Here is where these two filmmakers would part company with Wieland whose cinematic sensibility is, in the first instance, shaped by a non-narrative tradition. Both films are steeped in a narrativity that can be more easily situated in relation to the psychodramas of another founding mother of the avant-garde, Maya Deren.

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In the films of Deren, nature and the search for self are always an erotic and deeply psychological enterprise. Dreams allow passage to a human nature and a mysterious self that cannot be accessed through conscious states. Her films have been characterized as "trance" films for the way they foster this movement into the deepest recesses of the self, a movement that is less about social transgression as it was for the Surrealists, than about the journey through desire. *We Are Going Home* is a gorgeous surrealistic film that has all the characteristics of the trance film and more. It is structured around a dream sequence that has no real beginning or end. The first image we see is of a vending machine dispensing "Live Bait" in the form of a film canister. A woman opens the canister to find fish roe (eggs). The equation of fish roe and film, no doubt a nod to the Surrealists, opens up those ontological quandaries around mediation and truth that *Froglight* refers us to. It is this promise of direct contact along with the return "Home" in the film's title, that give some sign that the highly processed landscapes belong to the unconscious.

The film is structured around a network of desire between three women. One woman dives into a lake and ends up feet first in the sand. Another woman happens by and sucks her toes erotically at which point everything turns upside-down and backwards. Characters move through natural spaces (the beach, fields, water) disconnected from the physical landscapes and from each other. Superimposed figures over the ground move like ghosts, affecting and affected by nothing. Storm clouds, trees in the wind, a thistle, cows are all processed and pixelated to look supernatural. Toe sucking complete, the second woman lies down under an apple tree and falls asleep; the wind gently blows her shirt open. A third woman, a dream figure, emerges from a barn; skipping through fields she happens upon the sleeping figure and cannot resist the exposed breast, she bends over and sucks the nipple. The film ends with a sunset and romantic accordion music that is eerily off-key.

We Are Going Home is an erotic film whose sensuality derives both from the sublime image processing and from the disunity between all the elements in the film: the landscapes, the colours, the people. The sounds of birds cackling, water and wind that make up the soundtrack further intensify the film's discordance. It is precisely this disunity that charges the sexual encounters which are themselves

premised on an objectification. Home remains a mysterious place that exceeds logic and rationality; it is a puzzle whose pieces are connected in a seemingly linear manner but which will always remain mysterious.

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In contrast, the psychic space in Morton's *Across* is shaped through unity rather than disunity; the film is about crossing a bridge. The central tension in this lovely film, which accomplishes so much in a little over two minutes, is built upon a desire to connect with an image from the filmmaker's past. The metaphoric journey forward to see the past is conveyed through a hand-held camera travelling at a great speed across a dirt road, through fields, along fences and through woods. Different colour stocks combine with high-contrast black and white images of the bridge while on the soundtrack we hear a river. As we travel with the filmmaker through these landscapes, we encounter a high-angle solarized image of a woman sleeping in a field, a negative image of a woman swimming in the river below the bridge, a static shot of Morton staring into the camera, and home-movie images of Morton as a young girl running towards the camera. An intensity and anticipation is created in the movement and in the juxtaposition of the different elements. These are quietly resolved at the end of the film: the young girl smiles into the camera to mirror the close-up of Morton's inquisitive gaze, the swimmer completes her stroke, stands up, brushes the water from her eyes and seems to take a deep breath.

The workshop films that I have written about reveal a renewal of avant-garde concerns and experimental techniques—they are unabashedly beautiful and filled with a frenetic immediacy. To some degree their aesthetic approach grows directly out of the workshop structure: location shooting and hand-processing. Participants (which now include equal numbers of men) are invited to shoot surrounding locations and to collect images randomly rather than to preconceive them through scripting. The aim of the workshop is not to leave with a finished product but rather to experiment with shooting immediate surroundings using a Bolex and with hand-processing techniques. Many of the films produced at the workshop are never completed as final works but stand as film experiments, the equivalent of a sketchbook. This is the workshop's most important contribution to keeping film culture alive in Canada. The emphasis on process over product, on the artisanal over professional, on the small and the personal over the big and universal which has been so beneficial for a new generation of women filmmakers, also poses a resistance to an instrumental culture which bestows love, fame, and fortune on the makers of big feature narratives.



Passing Through: The Film Cycle of Philip Hoffman

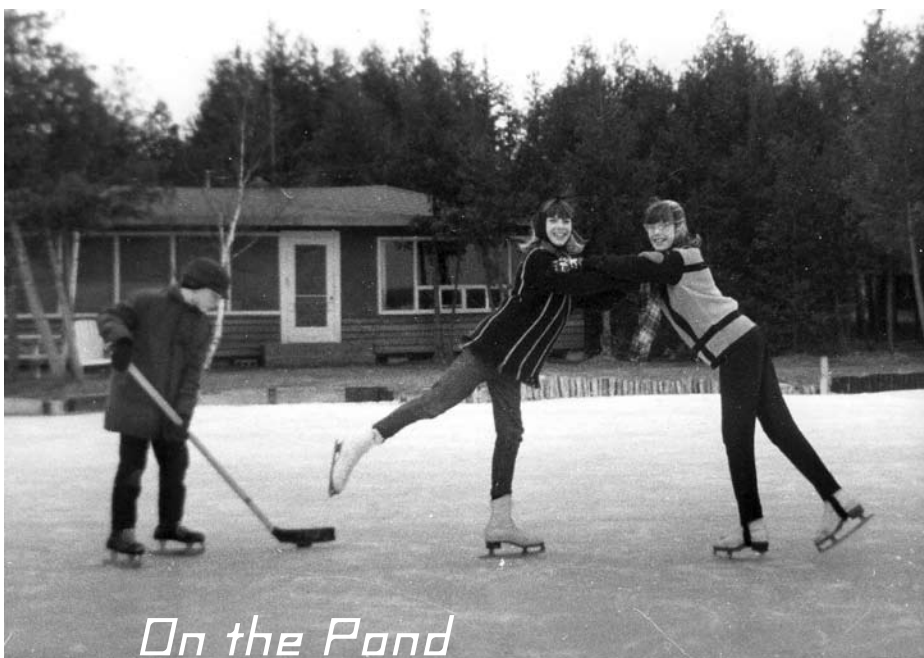
Mike Hoolboom

The films of Philip Hoffman have revived the travelogue, long the preserve of tourism officials anxious to convert geography into currency. Hoffman's passages are too deeply felt, too troubled in their remembrance, and too radical in their rethinking of the Canadian documentary tradition to quicken the pulse of an audience given to starlight. He has moved from his first college-produced short, *On the Pond* (1978)—set between the filmmaker's familial home and his newfound residence at college—to a trek across Canada in *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983). In Mexico he made the haiku-inspired short *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984). The next year he was invited to Amsterdam to observe the set of Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts*, and made *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (1986). Trips to Europe to unearth the roots of his family formed the basis for *passing through/torn formations'* (1988) pan-continental dialogue of madness and memory. *Kitchener-Berlin* (1990) takes up this

immigrant connection from his father's side of the family. And the last work in what was only afterwards named a cycle, is *river* (1978–92), which is both a return home and an acknowledgement of the restless flux that lies at the heart of this project.

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For all of their circumnavigations, this cycle is primarily concerned with pictures of home and family, gathered with a keen diarist's eye that has revamped its vision at every turn, shifting styles with every work, as if in answer to its subject. Denoting the family as source and stage of inspiration, Hoffman's gracious archeology mines a concession of tragic encounters, powerfully refashioning his intersection with the limits of representation. His restless navigations are invariably followed by months of tortuous editing as history is strained through its own image, recalling Derrida's dictum that everything begins with reproduction. Hoffman's delicately enacted shaping of his own past is at once poetry, pastiche, and proclamation, a resounding affirmation of all that is well with independent cinema today.



On the Pond

is an elaboration of the family slide show, its intimate portraits greeted with squeals of recognition and a generational shudder of light and shadow. The slides show the filmmaker as a child, his unguarded expression an ensign for innocence. In winter he is dwarfed by the furry excess of his parka; summertime finds him casting flies on the Saugeen River (subject of the final film in the cycle), trekking through forest, or lounging by the family

cottage. Reviewing the photographs with family, the filmmaker asks, "What do I look like?" in a gesture that underlines the reliance of identity on the family's complex of role play, fantasy, and projection, on its investment in shared secrets, and its dramatic restagings of generational loss and symmetrical neglects. As the author of the film, Hoffman assumes a distinctly paternal guise, but within its confines he is very much the son, waiting on his elders for the signs of assent that will take shape as his own desire.

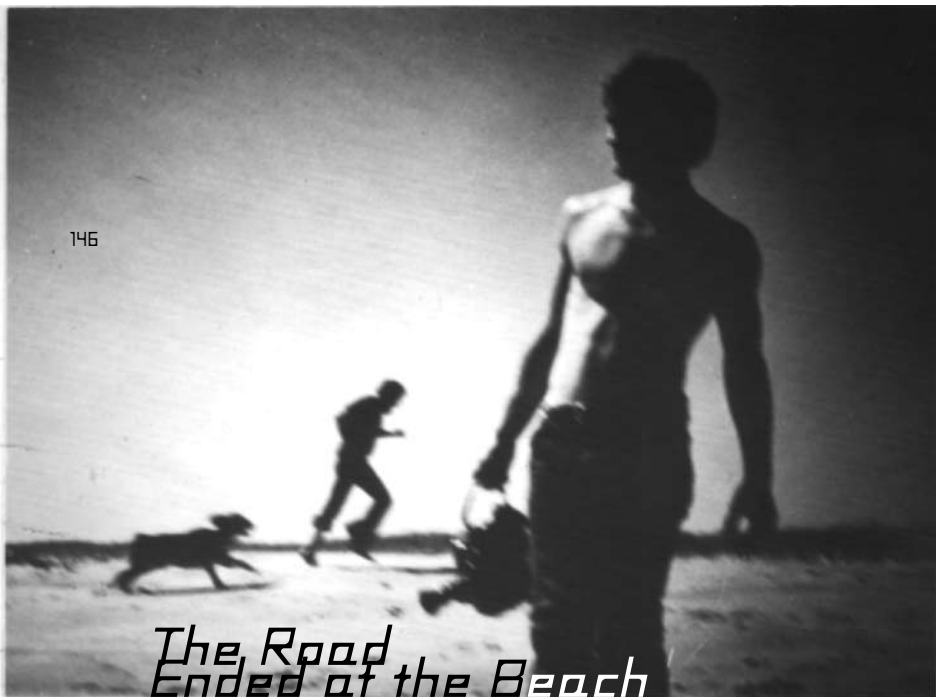
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Hoffman offers up these photographs as evidence, insistently returning to moments whose nostalgic impress provides a blank for the interchange of codes and riddles. These are hieroglyphs from the dead world, resurrected in order to reconstruct the memory of a time alien even to its inhabitants, because the measure of this familial solidarity must rely on a willful disavowal of experience, casting aside the ghosts of illness and psychosis, turning away from all that fails to conform to the familial ideal. What lies unspoken here, though hinted at in Hoffman's careful editing, are stories of a darker nature, his mother's illness, the death of relatives and the traumas of dislocation.

These photographs are drawn in a dialectic with dramatic re-enactments of Hoffman's boyhood. These centre on a boy of seven skating "on the pond," his only company a German shepherd. As he diligently hones his puck-handling skills, his easy skate over the big ice is interrupted by intrusive voice-overs—the exhortations of a coach and the scream of hockey parents. As Hoffman pans over a well-stocked trophy case and the young boy falls to the ice in a paroxysm of push-ups, the public stakes of this private practice become clear. He is leaving the family. His play has already become a kind of work, the means by which he will move from the pond to the city, though the cost is the incessant clamour for achievement. Everywhere the superego beckons.

No sooner has the dream been conjured than it ends. In a long pan over a projector run out of film and a record player at the end of its disk, the filmmaker rises from his bedside vigil over the past to close the apparatus of memory. Confronted with the escalating tensions of his trade, and a growing distance from his cherished solitude on the pond, Hoffman quits hockey, turning instead to a diaristic filmmaking which will stage the self in its various incarnations. All this is suggested in the film's closing shot, which shows Hoffman joining his young double, confidently calling for the puck before slipping on the icy sheen, no longer the player he once was. Brilliantly photographed in black and white, with a spare piano score and a sure use of accompanying sound, *On the Pond* marked an auspicious debut from Canada's premier diarist.

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The Road Ended at the Beach

is a shaggy road flick whose waystations of memory allow past adventures to meld into present ones, though its true aim is neither adventure nor destination, but an examination of male myth. Setting off for Canada's east coast, Hoffman joins two friends, fellow filmmaker Richard Kerr, enlisted as sound recordist, and Jim McMurry, driver of the van. *Road's* opening sequence finds them bent over the van, painting over its psychedelic glyphs with a fluorescent orange. Each of the "characters" is introduced through flashback—McMurry as the manic, fast-talking, blues-singing driver of past trips, Kerr as a fishing pal and filmmaking companion. In Ottawa they meet up with Mark, a friend who used to play jazz trumpet but now blows in a military band. "There's things you do for love and there's things you do for money," he flatly intones as the travellers move on, meeting Conrad Dubé, a cyclist since 1953, who has crossed the globe eight times, barely able to speak due to infantile paralysis. In Sable River they find Dan, a friend from film school now working in the east coast fisheries, trapped in a dead-end job in order to support his family. They push on to Cape Breton where they find Robert Frank, avatar of Beat romance and adventure, the irascible photographer whose book *The Americans* undraped a mythic travelogue of naked encounters. But he appears before them on a distinctly human scale, and they stand together as four strangers feebly attempting to speak, their visit inspired by nostalgia over a time they never had. Frank's

visit marks the end of *Road*'s first movement, an eastward passage whose outlook rested squarely in the rearview mirror, as if the burden of memory lay so heavy on the roadside that this was a journey of time instead of topography, the van's speed unable to outrace the velocity of the past.

Road's second movement opens with the remark, "Now I look inside the van." Once again each of the three characters is introduced—the filmmaker lost in a reverie of Kerouac adventures, McMurphy obsessed with the wretched condition of the van, and Kerr feeling imprisoned. Hoffman notes, "I expected adventure, but somehow the road had died since the first trip west," a summary assessment of old ties which have vanished even before the trip has begun. Now their cross-country dash serves only as a reminder of their differences, the passing of youth, and the end of an exclusively male fraternity. The third movement, entitled "The Road Ended at the Beach," features a reprise of the film's encounters and Frank's weary responses to questions about his Beat relations of two decades before. "Maybe it was freer because you knew less. I never kept in close contact with them. Sometimes I see Allen..." These offerings mark an eerie prophecy for the three travellers, whose time of abandoned locomotion is past. The din of the road can no longer disguise the fact that they never learned to speak with one another. The film ends with the promise of its title: children and dogs moving back and forth across the beach as a massive rocky outcropping peers out of the waters in the distance. These planes of play, passage, and foreboding are a metaphor for the film's journey. *Road* is a passage from innocence to experience, cast beneath the paternal backdrop of a Beat mythos, its romantic notions of flight decomposed here in the cold frame of the van.

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Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion (6 min 1984) is a hand-held travelogue of North America, presented in the unbroken twenty-eight-second shots of a spring-wind camera and the intertitles of a Mexican journey. Hoffman's pictures show moments of the everyday, drawn from public circumstances and viewed from a discreet distance. It opens with a pair of dirt roads marking an intersection, and beyond them a massive rouged advert for Coca-Cola. As diesel trucks storm past, we wait with the burro, tethered to an adjacent telephone post, as if waiting for the passing dream of technology to dissolve again into the Mexican roadside. Two shots frame street musicians while, on the track, a horn squalls plaintively, the lone aural counterpart to this requisition of the everyday. These pictures form part of an alternating passage of image and text that occupies the body of the film. Homely, hand-lettered haikus relate the story of a Mexican boy lying dead, his passage of mourning and reclamation charged in Hoffman's blank verse. The filmmaker pointedly refuses to make an image of this stranger, and this refusal is the real subject of this

travelogue. Each of his images are suffused with this death, as the words struggle to suggest all that lies beyond representation.

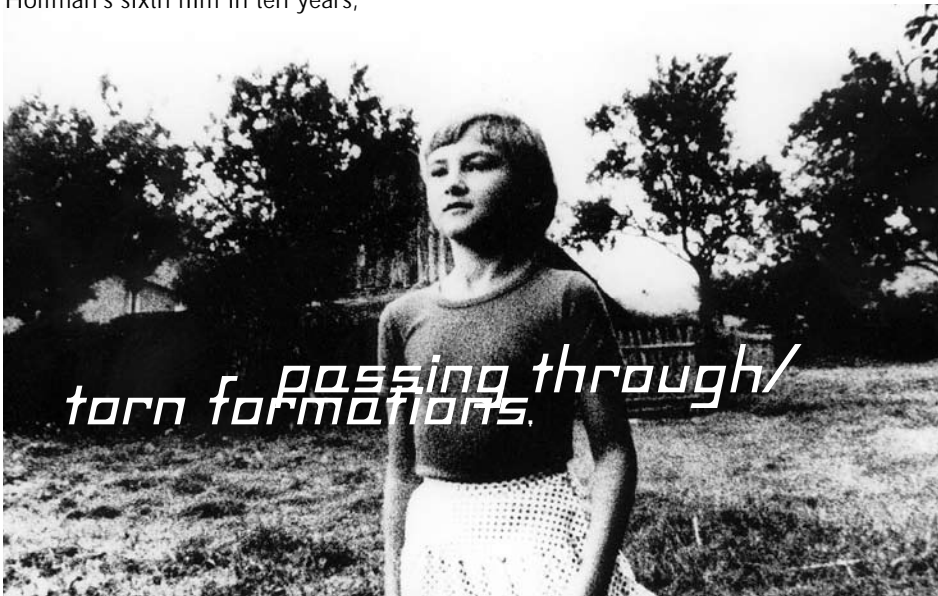
148 *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (23 min 1986) was occasioned by an invitation from British filmmaker Peter Greenaway to observe the shoot of *A Zed and Two Noughts*. Hoffman's diary excerpts are rife with a Greenaway-esque fiction that pits two English fathers as competing heirs to the originary mantle of Canadian documentary practice. The first is Greenaway himself, lynchpin of the structuralist mockumentary. His employment of BBC baritone Colin Canticle and serial musician Michael Nyman lent his early work an authentic documentary feel, although his voice-over texts are patently fabricated—speculative fictions which often catalogue an inexorable progression towards death. This willful play of documentary forms is set against the second father in *Zoo's* lineage—John Grierson. Grierson was the British cultural czar who founded the National Film Board (NFB), a federal institution whose documentary praxis was designed “to show Canada to Canadians.” His sternly realist conventions undermined Canadian dramatic aspirations; the NFB's colonialist perspectives would remain the most public expression of Canadian film for decades. For many years a documentary seminar bearing Grierson's name gathered makers from around the world, and it was there that Hoffman and Greenaway met, and where the invitation to observe Greenaway's shoot was extended, as Hoffman explains in his film.

Hoffman's rendering of the Greenaway production focuses on its apparatus of shaping, on the efforts of an elephantine crew to produce light where there is none, hang invisible cords, lay track, and gather some of the dissembling flocks that crowd Greenaway's zoo allegory. Interposed with fables of construction are a number of diary interludes which are captioned in a hilariously understated voice-over read by an actor. Alongside an image of a large wooden apple overlooking an empty park, Hoffman spins a tale of lovers who look to its girth for privacy, the approach of a voyeuristic teenager who is eventually joined by his romantically troubled companion, and finally a group of boys who arrive, pitching sticks for their dog in an effort to disturb the couple. The narrator recites, “I crossed the river and this is what I filmed after they all left.” This narrative construct of extra-filmic events, of all that lies outside the frame, points to the meek rectangle of the apparatus, its soft enclosures pregnant with syntax. By framing his diaristic intentions within a tradition of Canadian documentary practice, Hoffman underlines the radical contingency of the image—its status as truth and guarantor of experience lost in the runes of a text that may shape it to any end whatsoever. The truth of an image lies outside its frame, in the restless constellation of discourse and ideology that sur-

rounds any image and its reception. This observation is especially pointed in a Canadian setting, where the bulk of early Film Board productions was comprised entirely of newsreel footage culled from abroad. The act of documentary lay in their ordering, and in composing the inevitable voice-over text that would grant these pictures coherence. Adopting the Greenaway strategy of fictional ruses applied to documentary settings, Hoffman decomposes the Grierson legacy, unmasking its alliance with state control, class hierarchies, and mythologies of the noble poor. He insists that documentary practice is a fiction after all, a construction of fragments aligned to the ends of its maker.

Nowhere is the reliance of cinema on a metanarrative more pronounced than in the film's mid-section. The narrator recounts a visit to the zoo where one of the elephants suffers a heart attack. He agonizes over whether to film the scene, and finally does, but after the animal's death he exits ashamed, leaving the footage in the freezer, untouched and unprocessed. This is all declaimed over black—the blank passage representing the footage never developed. But after the credits seal the film, a final image appears—it shows the elephant falling and flailing, and then being helped to its feet by an attendant. So the filmmaker has processed the film, after all. And the elephant did not die, but merely fell. By displacing the film's centre and leaving it to protrude past the film's close, Hoffman invites the viewer to fold it back into the film, to join the blank recital of the heart attack with the silent pictures of its recovery, and so to retake the film's journey, and sceptically overturn its assertions and statements of fact. At once an essay on the Canadian documentary tradition and a long fraternal riddle, *?O,Zoo!* scans a flock of red herrings with a luminous photography and rare, reflexive wit.

Hoffman's sixth film in ten years,



is a generational saga, laid over three picture rolls, that rejoins in its symphonic montage the broken remnants of a family separated by war, disease, madness, and migration. An extract from Christopher Dewdney's *Predators of the Adoration* begins the film in darkness. The poet narrates the story of "you"—a child who explores an abandoned limestone quarry. Oblivious to the children who play around him, it is the dead that fascinate, pressed together to form limestones that part slowly between prying fingers before lifting into a lost horizon. After this textual prelude in darkness, the following scene is painfully silent. It shows a woman feeding her enfeebled mother in a quiet reversal of her own infancy. The older woman is clearly nearing death here, and Hoffman's portrayal of his mother and grandmother is tender and intimate, the camera caressing the two of them slowly, in a communion of touch.

Each figure in the film has a European double, as if the entry into the New World carried with it not only the inevitable burdens of translation, but also the burden of all that could not be said or carried, all that needed to be left behind. There are two grandmothers in the film—Babji, dying in a Canadian old age home, and Hanna, whose Czech tales are translated by the filmmaker's mother. There are likewise two grandfathers—Driououx, married to the dying Babji in Canada, and Jancyk, shot by his own son after refusing to cede him land rights. This son is returned to the scene of the shooting by Czech authorities and asked to recreate the event for a police film three months later. Unable to comply he breaks down instead, poised between death and its representation. The murderer's Canadian double is Wally, the homeless outcast whose wanderings are at the heart of the film. It is Wally who builds the film's central image—"the corner mirror"—two mirrored rectangles stacked at right angles. This looking glass offers a "true reflection," not the reversed image of the usual mirror, but the objectified stare of the Other. His accordion playing provides inspiration for the accordion heard on the track, and produces another image of unity within division, the left and right hands operating independently.

The darkroom, a ceremony of mixing potions, gathering up the shimmering images, the silvery magic beneath dream's surface. In the morning Babji would tell us what our dreams meant, and then stories of the old country would surface, stories I can't remember... Now that she's quiet, we can't hear about where it all came from, so it's my turn to go back, knowing at the start the failure of this indulgence, but only to play out these experiments already in motion. (*passing through/torn formations*)

This connection between things made in the dark—doesn't it lie at the heart of every motion picture? We can say for certain that this darkness has occupied the centre of Hoffman's film work since *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion*. While *Somewhere Between* moves around his real life encounter with a boy lying dead on the Mexican roadside, the boy is nowhere to be seen; Hoffman relates the death in a series of printed

intertitles that punctuate the film. Similarly, midway through *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)*, an elephant's heart attack is related in voice-over while the screen remains dark, and the voice explains, somewhat abashedly, that showing the animal's death could only exploit the subject.

In each instance the missing centre turns around death, and this trope of absence is further complicated by the "missing" centre of passing through. While the film performs a series of balletic turns around the filmmaker's uncle—showing as many as three images simultaneously, in a counterpoint usually reserved for music—he is usually present only in Hoffman's narration. Because he is the family's outsider, homeless, unable to "make himself presentable," lensing him would show only his infirmities, his inabilities. So Hoffman makes a radical move and removes his image, while at the same time making him the central character in this familial drama. He represents, for this family, the unspeakable, the unwatchable, the dark heart at the centre of this migration to the new world. The cost of travelling, and of forgetting. In a series of fragmented anecdotes, recollections, images, and voice-over, we learn of his homeless vagrancy, his affinity for pool and the accordion, his building of the corner mirror, and his abandoned daughter. Hoffman searches out the reasons for his uncle's homeless wandering in the Czechoslovakia he left behind, the place of his conception ravaged by plague and occupation. That he should bear the stamp of this history, this sickness, without a glimpse of the death camps which would claim his ancestors, recalls for us the movement of the film around a figure hardly seen. The filmmaker moves in his place, drawing his camera over the places "he" could never go, looking for reasons "he" could never guess in his restless quest for shelter and food, for the perfect pool game, and the delirium of the accordion.

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He stares out. Fingers pound the keyboard. Magically. Melodies repeat. Again and again. Fingers dissolve into fingers. He was past the point of practice. The music was a vacant place to return to. Over and over. His playing gave him passage. (*passing through/torn formations*)

Kitchener-Berlin (33 min 1990) is a tale of two cities divided by history, language and geography. Their alliance stems in part from a German migration that would settle on the small Canadian town of Kitchener as the locus for dreams of a new world. Before its re-naming after the catastrophes of WWI, Kitchener was called Berlin, so the film's title re-asserts this historical relation, in an uncovering typical of Hoffman's oeuvre.

Kitchener-Berlin is a movement into the city's Germanic traditions, and its rituals of memory, bereavement, and technology. It is a voyage at once personal and political, begun with movies of home, of children unwrapping war toys with unbridled delight as rockets flare over Germany, reducing its domestic

interiors to a shatter of rubble and blood. Hoffman introduces archival photographs of old Kitchener, showing men on the hunt and the building of the main street, while inside the cathedral, candle-lit processions prepare a child for baptism. The only accompanying sound is a church bell inexorably tolling. It is a call to witness, a plaintive demand for gathering, asking that we stand once more before the wounds of the past.

152 Hoffman enters present-day Germany armed with a Steadicam—a gyroscopic device that permits the camera to float smoothly through space. He guides its disembodied presence over the cobblestones of Berlin, their mortared rectangles forming the foundation of centuries. It floats past tourists lying in wait, cameras at the ready, caught in a slow-motion stare of anticipation in locales previewed in travel guides and brochures. They wait before a massive church front as if for history to materialize, all the better to turn it into souvenirs, proofs of travel and of identity. As these sites have been photographed so often, these pictures serve only to identify their makers. They state: I was there. Or more simply: I exist. Hoffman's meta-tourism collects these moments in multiphonic exchange, two and three images appearing simultaneously, as the camera floats past, ghost-like, through those remains of the past we call the present.

Kitchener-Berlin is interrupted midway by a Canadian film made in the twenties entitled *The Highway of Tomorrow or How One Makes Two*. It shows a dirigible leaving England for Canada, its airborne phallus promising the technological fruits of empire. After landing, the filmmaker/pilot steps into the editing room with his double—a twin manufactured through trick photography—and together they pore over images of the trip. They thread a projector and turn its historical spotlight into the waiting lens of the camera, marking the beginning of *Kitchener-Berlin's* second movement, entitled *A Veiled Flight*. This movement is marked by discontinuity and an apparent random succession of events. It is begun by miners working underground, who unearth bridesmaids and horses, family rituals of touch, an Imax film-shoot staging native rituals, and the filmmaker himself, crouched over his desk in contemplation. It closes with a cave ceremony lit by candles; the furtive rock etchings a reminder of private manufactures where the division of signs and the events they depict seem less inevitable than today. *A Veiled Flight* is also comprised of marks like these, expressionistic outpourings that represent an unconscious flow. It is an expiration of memories redolent with mythology and association, a rite of purification that looks to begin again beneath the earth's surface, in the shadowy enclosures of histories that may be shared without being understood. This film asks that its two halves be brought together like the two names of its title—the haunting historical stalk of its opening movement joined with the unconscious lure of the second,

both combining to frame a portrait of ruin and restoration.

river (15 min 1978–92) is a geographical portrait. Photographed over the course of a decade in three distinct styles, it is a meditation on the way technology mediates encounters with the natural. It marks, above all, a return to a childhood pastoral retreat; its slow-moving rhythms bear its observer in a contemplative embrace of overhanging wood and summery intentions. *river*'s first movement reveals a fishing excursion, the lush hues of a sun-inspired afternoon drifting easily in the glassy mirror of the river's flow, its restful solitude untroubled by the ravages of an industrialized south. Humanity is glimpsed in edges and peripheries; a paddle drips concentric rows along the water's surface, a hand lowers anchor; a fly is cast against a soaring treeline. These passages are silent, meditative, and idyllic—a chained series of lap dissolves easing the passage of an afternoon's watchful rest. The second scene is markedly different. Photographed in black and white video, it continually treks downstream, its overexposure granting an unearthly quality to the surroundings. But because the boat is rudderless, left to follow the river's current while Hoffman stands filming on the prow, it soon encounters a variety of natural obstacles—trunks and rocks arise from the river's surface to impede passage. The microphone rests on the boat's bottom, so each obstacle occasions a loud and often hilarious track of scraping and bumping. This sound contrasts with the sublime pictorial record of the scene. Together, image and sound produce a kind of pastoral slapstick, the journey's romantic inclinations betrayed by the physical evidence of the voyage itself. *river*'s third movement draws its opening sections together, refilming the lyric impressions of the opening off a rear screen projection, employing the same crude black and white video camera used to photograph the flotational trek of the second movement. The final movement runs inside the river itself, diving below water to glimpse the sunstroked grounds of its descent, aqueous fronds waving in the light of afternoon. Sharp movements abound here, in contrast to the stoic solidity of the first passage or the slow-moving drift of the second. The camera darts beneath the waves in a gestural cadence finally extinguished by a blinding white light, then seeks its source of illumination in a blank passage that signifies beginning and end, the addition of colour, the simultaneous occurrence of all experience, the filmic equivalent of the sublime.

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Taken together these seven films constitute a remarkable journey of first-person cinema. This cycle marks a life from its beginnings to middle age, from photographs which hide as much as they declare, toward a showdown with imaging technologies. Throughout, Hoffman's impulse is to unearth and lay bare, to share secrets which separate past and present. To re-animate the dead world in order to mourn it more perfectly. To re-member.



And...

Barbara Sternberg

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This is a collaboration (interactive). Together we're making this piece (I almost said film). I'm putting forward some thoughts, images, sensations, and, off to one side, influences that form a larger context. You might decide to stop here. Flip forward. Inject some commentary. *How will I know?*



I read a book (well, parts of a book) called *The Hero: Myth, Image, Symbol*. It was a period when I was having a hard time getting out of bed. Afraid, I just wanted to sleep. I realized then that the real heroes are you and I, Everyman, who get up and live each day, who face the uncertainties and struggles of life, the paradoxes...life *and* death, living with the knowledge of death, knowing that we can't know.

The mystery that is in the everyday. No, the mystery that *is* the everyday. The awesome/awfulness of life.

Filming the daily, what's around. Observing the play of life, its rhythms, patterns. *Feel the wind*. Noticing the similarities in seeming differences. Everything is related. The multitudinous—manyness and

All of your past, is it more than a dream to you right now? —Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

Possum, ergo sum. (I can, therefore I am.)
—Simone Weil

Reason's last step is that there are a number of things beyond it. —Pascal

relatedness. Where are the boundaries between you and me?

Earth Air Fire Water Light Energy transmutes.

Repetition is a principle in life. The sun rises every day. Habit, ritual, identity. And yet, there is no repetition possible! The third tap differs from the first by virtue of being third not first. (Gertrude Stein's insistence versus repetition.) You can't step into the same stream twice.

Repetition as a principle in film. And time. And motion. In other words, film is like life. Is inherently involved with the same basic principles. Is fleeting, ephemeral—just as you and I are. Needs repetition (but with slight differences) for meaning and for structure to be apparent. Has past (memory) and future (anticipation). Can I or a film be solely in the present? Film is in time and of light. Exists in a tension between what is real and what is illusion. (There is no motion in a motion picture.) *Is change the reality and permanence the illusion or vice versa?*

Film's emulsion is analogous to the "stuff" of life. Images appear and disappear; we have our time upon the stage. The movement of construction and destruction, form and formlessness, shadow and light. Layers of images accumulating meaning over time. *And time cannot be held.*

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Your life is like a candle burning. Whether you are aware of it or not, it is burning.

—Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

The more real a thing is, the more mysterious it becomes.

—Jack Chambers



Picture: leaves fluttering, flames flickering, water splashing a child's face shocking him, waves hitting the shore, a hand groping blindly forward...

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I work with images bodily, suggestively between representation and abstraction, between blurred and distinct. Beyond naming is being.

Film is a medium of endless play—discrete bits of time/space set next to each other; the orange of tungsten (inner), the blue of daylight (outer); sound as foil, context, content—and the silence of stillness (being). Creating an experience in film. Wow! *How was it for you?*

I find that raising my eyes slightly above what I am regarding so that the thing is a little out of focus seems to bring the spiritual into clearer vision...
—Emily Carr



How many colours are there in a field of grass to a crawling baby unaware of the word "green"...
—Stan Brakhage

Our movies are extensions of our own pulse, of our heartbeat, of our eyes, our fingertips...
—Jonas Mekas

Art is to embrace others—whether to convey something difficult or to talk about light.
—Joyce Wieland

What is meant by reality?...now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying...But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates.
—Virginia Woolf

It was enough to exist, preferably still and silent, in order to feel its mark...the mark of existence.
—Clarice Lispector

The Entwined Fates of Bruce LaBruce and Pleasure Dome

John McCullough

The ascendancy of Bruce LaBruce to the status of international art/porn star is a complex story of transgression, art, and sex in the marketplace. His story is also about the contradictions of avant-gardism, political activism, and modernity. Since the mid-1980s LaBruce has moved from publishing underground gay and punk zines to writing for mainstream papers and authoring a book—*The Reluctant Pornographer* (Toronto: Gutter Press, 1998)—while being the subject of another, *Ride, Queer, Ride* (Winnipeg: Plug In Gallery, 1996). Being once a student and critic of film as well as an underground super 8 filmmaker, LaBruce now often works in the midst of mass culture making music videos and porn. And he continues to make feature-length 16mm films, which are much-anticipated events at both mainstream and queer film festivals around the globe.

Pleasure Dome has had a significant and extensive relationship with LaBruce, exhibiting his early super 8 shorts and all of his features. In fact it seems that LaBruce's persona—transgressive wit-about-town—is one which Pleasure Dome, in its own way, has incorporated into its reputation as a successful publicly funded exhibitor of avant-garde time-based art. Within the institution's nucleus—one might say in its unconscious—there resides a core element of market savvy which understands its reputation is linked to the marketability of sex and porn as transgressive art.

But reflecting on a century of avant-garde and popular culture, LaBruce's work (as well as much of the work exhibited by Pleasure Dome) has to be seen not as innovative or revolutionary but as merely symptomatic of the time and the market. Now that every commercial impression merges art and sex (and sometimes violence) into a message of transgression being beautiful and cynicism being freedom (and all of these as being interrelated with each other unconditionally) it is clear that both art and sex have been colonized by commercial imperatives. As much as LaBruce's aesthetic owes a debt to marginal and radical political movements (punk and anarchism) it is worth remembering that what most people now "know" and recognize about such movements is their semiotics, not their politics. Consequently, much of LaBruce's reputation as a radical artist rests on a simulated politics indebted more to Warhol and pop culture than Duchamp or Act-Up.

Similarly, Pleasure Dome's tendency to avoid traditional political art in favour of promoting that which is naughty, conceptual, and "cutting edge" reflects the hegemony of ad agency discourse and the diminishing space for activist art. The legitimacy granted any artwork today hinges largely on its perceived ability to be easily promoted and this suggests a generalized compliance with market demands (the ability of a product to "cut through the clutter" or to "sell itself"). This sets in motion a furious battle as each piece of art and each artist is in competition for "shelf life" and this perpetuates the radical bifurcation which has historically characterized the avant-garde project (activism or formalism?). It remains to be seen what, if any, transgression can manifest itself as liberation in our time.





Skin Flick, BRUCE LABRUCE

Every Faggot Loves a Fascist

Scott Treleaven

Everyone knows about the legendary enmity between skins and punks. It's the difference between order and chaos, fascism and anarchism, repression and gratification. So in 1991 when Bruce LaBruce unleashed *No Skin Off My Ass* on an unsuspecting world, it was hardly surprising that, in the hands of a (post)queer (post)punk filmmaker, this rift between punk and skin would get turned into total Stockholm Syndrome fetishism. The punk hairdresser falls in love with his oppressor. The skin falls for the punk. The skinhead ditches Nazism and grows a mohawk. A fine romance.

Since then Bruce has been basking in his international cult status, laying waste to '80s alternative culture in *Super 8 1/2* (1993), and reveling in the glamorous decay of the Los Angeles strip in *Hustler White* (1996). In addition to co-authoring two books Bruce has been busy photographing and writing for a number of gay porn rags, music mags, and local papers. But no matter how far he has progressed from

the early days of *No Skin...*, Bruce was bound to return to the simple, incisive premise that launched his career: every faggot loves a man in uniform.

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Eight years hence, in his new foray into skinhead subculture, *Skin Flick*, LaBruce hikes the stakes accordingly. Instead of one skin, there's now a gang of them (LaBruce nearly titled the film *Gang of 4 Skins*), and instead of being pursued by a queeny punk hairdresser, the skins are getting it on by cottaging with "respectable" bourgeois fags through break-and-enter escapades, or with each other. Originally commissioned as a full-fledged porno flick, replete with real porn stars (Tom International) and high-fashion model/actress Nikki Uberti, and shot on seedy straight-to-video super 8, *Skin Flick* was shot entirely on location in London, England, with a German crew and backed by Berlin's Cazzo Films. If the film's parentage seems a little odd, it's also worth noting that Bruce decided to produce two versions of the film—a hardcore version, and one suitable for more, uh, "artistic" establishments.

Like all of LaBruce's work, *Skin Flick* goes—like a pitbull—straight for the throat of white, privileged homoculture. An apathetic, sushi-munching, bourgeois, mixed-race gay couple are the irritating counterpoint for LaBruce's equally repellent Nazi skins. The skins read erotic poetry, *seig beil* around town, jerk off to *Mein Kampf* and screw each other in a cemetery (after thoroughly bashing LaBruce). Of course, the veneer of respectability and liberalism that the gay couple represents goes out the window the moment the rich white homo has a chance to get fucked by a bootboy in a public bathroom. LaBruce has never been squeamish when it comes to leveling criticism at queer fetishism of race, class, and control. So is it repugnant? Satirical? If it weren't for LaBruce's trademark slapstick scenes, caustic commentary, and over-the-top porno flick stylings, it could even be dangerous.



Interview with Bruce LaBruce and G.B. Jones

Cameron Bailey

BAILEY: In the mid-'80s you were responsible for the seminal zine *J.D.s.* Tell me about its distribution.

JONES: Well, we took five copies to Glad Day [Toronto's gay bookstore]. And they took them.

LaBRUCE: Reluctantly. And they said, "Well, it isn't very goooood. But we'll take five." And I went back two days later and they were off the shelf already. And he said, "Well, we've decided we just can't move them." After two days. He said it's just not the sort of product that we can get rid of here. They were totally unsupportive, they didn't even seem to be interested in looking at it. But then we found out that they had given them to their friends or something, and they were circulating in a gay bar.

It wasn't commercial enough for them, slick enough for them, and also the content—we're very critical of the gay community.

BAILEY: What's the bourgeois gay and straight punk reaction to queer-core?

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LaBRUCE: It's very divisive now and it depends entirely on what city you're in. I got beat up once when I showed a gay film at the Quoc Te. I got punched in the face and spit on by a skinhead, and punched in the face by a mohawk, so they certainly weren't very hospitable. If you go in looking gay and acting gay they'll be a lot less hospitable than if you go in looking like you belong. But we're a lot more tuned in to the punk mentality than the way the gay community has developed.

JONES: I try not to.

LaBRUCE: A lot of the gay video I've seen in this city seems stuck in a '70s rut. It seems to be somewhat apolitical, or invariably it excludes women, or it's focussed on a passé gay image, like a clone image or something. The stuff I've seen could have been done ten years ago.

There's this whole thing being still fixated on coming out, for example, which I think is a totally overrated concept. It's for people who feel they have to prove themselves and be accepted by an establishment or by their family. And they want their family to recognize them as being legitimate or being exactly like them, you know, come out and be accepted as good monogamous fags. It's like the Oprah Winfrey fags. They're assimilationists. There's nothing politically subversive about it whatsoever. Or if they do get into more subversive politics, it's still based on, let's say, bar life. And Toronto gay bar life is stagnant. And they're fixated on really antiquated drag, and drag that's insulting to women, and they have like competitions for leather men, or the grand empress or whatever.

JONES: A friend and I worked at Togethers, which was supposedly a dyke bar but it was run by two gay men, and we both ended up getting fired because they said we were turning it into a mohawk palace, even though it was busier than it had ever been in its history. I think they wanted a tax write-off.

BAILEY: So what are your bars?

LaBRUCE: Well, I don't go out.

JONES: Maybe to see bands.

BAILEY: Gay and lesbian?

JONES: We thought it was odd that every time we went out it was like, you're going there, I can't go. I'm going here, you can't go. It just seemed ridiculous.

LaBRUCE: We have all these favourite films from the early '70s, like *Some of My Best Friends Are...* or *Boys In the Band*, or *The Killing of Sister George*, where you have really exciting acting and looking gay people and lesbians. The bar in *Some of My Best Friends Are...* has lots of women in it and they're accepted. They're not only tolerated, but seen as something very vital to the bar.

There's always been exciting gay work in film, like Warhol or Kenneth Anger or Jack Smith, so it just seems natural. Also I go to tons of films. And super 8 seems to be very consistent with what we do with *J.D.s.* It's cheap and you can do it at home and slap it together and you don't have to worry about production values.

I think it's more the process. With Warhol's early films, his screen tests, he'd just turn on the camera and let it run. He was just documenting what was going on. I think that's where the similarity lies. My new film is a seventy-five minute super 8 film called *No Skin Off My Ass*. It's a remake of Robert Altman's *That Cold Day in the Park*, which Altman shot in Canada in '69. I shot one scene which was consciously a take-off of *Chelsea Girls*.

Gloria, I mean G.B., has this great technique of out-of-focus shots, which might be construed as stylistic transgression, but it might also be because she doesn't wear her glasses when she shoots.

JONES: No, I do consciously try to do everything badly. I shook the camera, I shook the camera tripod.

BAILEY: Why?

JONES: Because it has to be done.

LaBRUCE: Because she's a jayy deee.

[They have a small argument about Warhol's camera style, the wandering camera in *Chelsea Girls*.]

LaBRUCE: Sometimes it's just nice to piss people off and not give them what

they want. I think film has started to come to the point where it's so homogeneous, where style is one bland given that you're not supposed to stray from if you're going to be commercially viable. So we like to fuck with that.

We have shown our films in art galleries, and those are the audiences you can annoy the most. It's different from a bar, where it's casual.

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JONES: And they cheer the shoplifting scenes.

LaBRUCE: And the naked shots.

BAILEY: Are you moving in any particular direction?

JONES: I want my films to have more gratuitous sex and violence. My next film is all about a girl gang, and there's lots of fights.

LaBRUCE: I'm moving more towards pornography. In this new film for the first time I have unsimulated blow jobs, hard-ons, lots of nudity, bum licking, toe licking. It's just going beyond the pale. I think it's a natural progression, where I started making films with some nudity, and simulated blow jobs and always lots of gay content. But they are getting more explicit for sure. One thing that pornography really needs is humour, because it takes itself far too seriously.

JONES: *J.D.s* has lots of humour in it.

BAILEY: Is it important to distinguish between the sort of porn you're interested in producing and commercial porn?

LaBRUCE: I'd like to see commercial porn become more interesting.

JONES: Especially heterosexual pornography. I don't see why pornography has to leave victims in its wake. Dead people, people with ruined lives, drug problems. It should be fun. People should want to do pornography 'cause it's fun.

LaBRUCE: Yeah, you should have willing participants.

JONES: We just have our friends in our films. We don't pay them. Why does the porn industry have to pay people so much to get them to take off their clothes?

LaBRUCE: We're absolutely against censoring any porn, but at the same time we recognize that 95 percent of the porn that exists is garbage, and boring.

BAILEY: What about pop culture?

LaBRUCE: Well, there's nothing worse than people in the underground who have a really superior attitude to pop culture. And they think that what they're producing is art, or important, or transcendent or something and pop culture is something to be dismissed. Like that incredibly stupid society for the eradication of television. Television is like anything else, it's like pornography. If it's done in an interesting way, it can be incredibly effective. And Kristy McNichol is a good example—her lesbian exploits are legend.

[In my new film] I play a gay punk hairdresser who picks up a young skinhead in the park and takes him home and gives him a bath, like Sandy Dennis did, and locks him in the spare room. He escapes and goes and visits his dyke underground filmmaker sister, played by G.B. Jones.

Altman is a good example of someone who was doing outrageous things in the context of pop culture. I remember my parents went to see *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* in the one cinema in the small town near where I grew up. And they came home and my mother was like, oh, it's a dirty movie.

BAILEY: What about politics?

LaBRUCE: I think it's dumb to situate yourself along a political spectrum, because it's so artificial. And then you have to end up slotting all your actions and beliefs. Anarchy isn't something we consciously subscribe to.

One specific example is female nudity. It's a touchy thing but we feel that only women should be able to deal with that kind of imagery. A bunch of boys or men putting out images of women invariably objectifies or misrepresents them, because they're not representing themselves, they're representing the Other.

Whereas male nudes are fair game for everyone. And they should be exploited to no end. In *Slam!* we tried to make the pit into a really sexualized, erotic thing because that's something that's starting to be repressed in the punk community. It started out being very sexually ambiguous, and sexually dangerous, and it's becoming much more safe. So we're trying to re-radicalize punk and sex at the same time.





Being a Witness: A Poetic Meditation on *B/side*

Abigail Child

And on the intellectual or emotional level, she must contribute evidence to the trial of our present system of values.¹

Context†

When the police descended into Thompsons Square Park in Lower Manhattan in June 1991, there were 150 homeless in the park. The park, a creation of the renowned landscape architect Frederick Olmsted (who also designed Central Park) had housed hippies and Ukrainians for years in an uneasy truce aggravated by the increasing poverty and lack of city services through the 1970s and early 1980s. The park had been the scene of police riots in the two years preceding, riots involving punks and suburban teens who had

come and camped in the park that summer (1989). That riot was broadcast on television through the medium of artist videos recorded in the heat of the action. But in this case, two years later, it was a different scene. The police, in the interim, had refined crowd control, and brought in black helicopters that broadcast to us on roofs to "come down." Over 200 helmeted riot cops descended in an organized mass against the bedrolls and the people inside them. The Dominican church on the corner of Avenue B and 8th Street rang its bells through the night in sympathy with the dispossessed.

By morning fifty of the homeless had dispersed, another fifty moved further down the block and the remaining fifty were across the street, between avenues B and C, settled into an abandoned lot that had served the previous spring for a Michael J. Fox and James Woods movie mise-en-scène. I live on the block, across the street, and had been videotaping the successive urban displacements of my neighbourhood during that year, now waking up to a world where life copied art in perverse and tragic design.

For the first few weeks it was blue tents with children and occupants interacting with downtown photographers. Within a month, there were no children, and drugs and alcohol began to predominate. The encampment was quiet by 11 pm, waking up early to the sun, routinizing cleanup and resources. An American displacement camp less than two miles from Wall Street. Soweto in Manhattan.

The video material that opens *B/side* establishes you in this realm, as spectator, apart from, outside the homeless, who live without privacy of walls or windows. This is the beginning of acknowledged separation. The distance and position suggest a surveillance machine. The public as witness, the public as separate. The distance we will have to unravel, if we hope to approach an other.

Shoshana Felman in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* speaks of the appointment to bear witness. This is "paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak for the other and to others."²

Autobiography

This is my front yard, graffiti. The morning glories have mounted where previously there was dog shit and human piss. Someone has taken special time to carve out a home in the garden: microcosmos. Belonging to a neighbourhood.

On the ground are a doll house against a tent, a beer, stuffed bear stabbed in tree trunk, knots of broken rope, twist of bits that relay an entire class of marginalized Americans. Pallets, milk cartons, and bread trays are housing materials.

Autobiography itself thus turns out to be, paradoxically, an impersonal witness to a history of which it cannot talk but to which it nonetheless bears witness in a theory of translation, which is, at the same time, its new historical creation.³

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What gets between us is sometimes language and sometimes shyness and sometimes the realities of economics. We witness the colonization of peoples both internally and externally when we ignore the beggar, walk by the shapeless sleeping figure on the sidewalk, note, but do not linger as the police nudge, not so gently, a body out of sleep. In these moments, we collaborate in social forgetfulness. The margins are evoked and ignored. Perversion of vital interests estranged from life, money ruinously at centre.

On a number of levels, New York, that is, my neighbourhood, is the most local town in which I have lived. The scale is that of the human body, the streets are human sized. It is a city designed for the foot walker, the jay walker, the cross walker and the onlooker. It is a city of neighbourhoods that define themselves building by building, block by block or by street: Ludlow, Canal, Orchard, Saint Marks. Without the encapsulation and segregation of (need for) cars which bring worlds with them, within them (protective air supply), New York exists *in the flesh*. There is no (lasting) retreat from the streets. Neither the city nor its people have Defense. Its urban disturbances and absences surround the poor, invade the rich.

This begins right where her back leaves off

The individual must commit herself to walking on a floor, whether this be ground or made. Typically she will be close to walls of some kind. Walls, ceiling, and floor establish outside limits, establish inside and outside.⁴

The landscape (language) of my identification. The street is the habit of focus. The darkness, the shadows, demand increased attention. Our energies address this public space, complete with blind spots and strategies. The fact is proximity, flesh, intensity, necessity, intention. YOU CAN'T ESCAPE. Infect your presence under pressure in the (opposed) mill of homogeneous social structures.

Taking sides. It's a question of angle.

An older woman, dark haired, dressed in rags, haggard, comes on the car where we, all 5 o'clock commuters, sit gratefully. Ragged, loud, and shrill, she sings before she begs. Before she is finished, the transit official comes on to hustle her off. We, who are left, don't look at each other.

170 Reflection

Someone is thinking/speaking to herself. Analyzing beat of energies, of digression, remembering. Memory and this question: *What is the relation between narrative and history, between art and memory?* Articulate the relation between witnessing/events and speculation/fiction.

An attempt to see how issues of biography and history are neither represented nor reflected, but are translated, reinscribed, radically rethought. History as a translation, through which are created new articulations of perspective. Acknowledge the conceptual and social prisms through which we attempt to apprehend.

DISTANCE intervenes. Borders the process in which the eye joins mind to gather, investigatory witness. The first "speech" is gestures, at a distance. This without sound.

It is in the fabrics and inventive reconstructions of parts—refrigerator gratings used for porches, clothes as roofs, the fire hydrant as a shower—that we witness the creative adaptability of the human spirit in the homeless encampment.

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge or assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.⁵

What the testimony does not offer is a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events.

Testimony is, in other words, a discursive practice as opposed to pure fact or pure theory. To testify is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement. Or in this case, a visual act, a depiction of the real that asks us to be contemporaneous with its various parts, that demands the kind of shifting reality and fragmentary evidence that is experienced by the displaced themselves.

A Crisis of Representation

A crisis of representation happens in several directions when artists turn to social issues. On the one hand, there is the invisibility of the homeless themselves, silent on multiple counts: abandoned to the margins of our so-called civilized conscious; without home, displaced, nomadic; feared and despised by both fellow citizens and city hall. What language meets this silence? What language could do more than news sound bites to bring this plight into social awareness? Broadcast news provides predictable decontextualized information, tugs on heartstrings of public morality, usually seasonal, recurring at Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter. What the nightly news avoids is analyzing the political, social, and economic forces that have created the situation. The sound bites themselves are theatricalized in the context of "breaking news" to reconstruct an artificial melodrama. The homeless become an iconic portrait that is naturalized in the urban situation, a fixture of late Capital. Insoluble, endemic.

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Independent film has historically attempted to break up the sentimentality of mainstream melodrama, both in fiction and in the documentary. The evolving of a subversive documentary tradition has attempted to erase the authoritative voice of the narrator, who more often than not leads the viewer through the subject, preventing a more complex imaginative response. In broadcast television, ideas are summarized, discourse and contradiction are regarded as problematic and fitting the subject into its time slot is a prime goal.⁶

On the other hand, issues of the responsibility of the maker began to be discussed in the 1960s. The filmmaker starts to theorize her or his intersection in the conjunction of the personal, the formal, and the sociological. Several artists in the 1970s emphasized the complex position of the maker by reflexively recreating the maker in the work, drawing distinctions from social documentary traditions of objectivity and analysis. Such is the case with Jean-Luc Godard, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Yvonne Rainer. In the 1980s, innovative video activism adopted social realist and agit prop strategies to expose the political dimension of urban and cultural politics.⁷

In *B/side*, I choose differently, borrowing from literary theory and poetic construction. Searching for a language to meet this torn reality, I move to include plural aspects of self and history, self and public, to combine a heteroglossic dialogue, experimenting with social, discursive, and narrative asymmetries. To create an unfinished language, "a living mix of varied and opposing voices."⁸

One might ask, how does this differ from news sound bites? The editing strategies of the avant-garde have on occasion been attacked as sharing

the speed and superficiality of our commercial culture. The arguments have ranged from a critique of speed to an alignment of the long take with radical viewing.⁹ I would argue that the answers are not so simple: that context and intent are essential to any analyzing of the *effect* of a work of art. That, in essence, the work of art activates a number of levels in the viewer and that a simple dichotomous good/bad, corrupted/pure judgment misses the complex node where perceptions and feelings are activated. The long shot in the classic Hollywood mise-en-scène can be radical (as with the moving camera of an Orson Welles film) or unnoticeable (in any number of dialogue-driven movies of the 1930s and current era). Fast cutting can be a meaningless attention-getter or attention-flattener (as with tv advertisements, or in, for example, the flatulent Oliver Stone film, *The Doors*). On the other hand, editing can be historical, and aesthetically subversive (as in Eisenstein, Gance or Vertov), or spectacularly and cognitively disassociative (as in Stone's more successful *Natural Born Killers*). In choosing a heteroglossic vocabulary of styles, visual sources, and perspectives in *B/side*, I am consciously challenging a homogeneous position, the classic one-point Renaissance perspective, if you will. Instead, film facilitates an array of perspectives, a motility in which breakage is both trope and material of the real. The essence of the scheme is to make the events and the victims of the event visible, *unnaturalizing* homelessness as an inevitable part of the urban landscape.

Film Methodology

To accomplish this aim of *unnaturalizing* homelessness, the film places us in multiple positions in regard to its narrative. At one point, the audience is the homeless, at another, the bystander, and at still another point, the perpetrator. The film operates as a movement between heterogeneous points of view, and as an exploration of these differences. You, as audience, are moved between spaces of the witness who sees and hears, to images of the victim's past, between exteriorities and interiorities. In cinema, both realms are present, and at the same moment. It might be argued that the document and fiction combine in *all* film representation. Roland Barthes, in discussing the photograph, speaks of "the stubbornness of the referent" and also its transformation into an "image."¹⁰ With moving images, this sliding between history and fiction, this exchange of referent and representation, radically undermines and complicates or interrogates the possibility of the authentic.

For instance, the Hollywood fictions of the 1930s provide lively tableaux for historical and cultural analysis, while documentaries regularly involve some kind of re-enactment, and in all cases there is the intervention of the

camera and more powerfully, perhaps, the hand of the editor. If we examine the early ethnographic documentaries, such as those by Edward Curtis, *In the Land of the War Canoes* (1914) and Robert Flaherty, *Nanook* (1922), we find the subjects of these films are asked to re-create traditions that are no longer contemporaneous. Note, as well, the overwhelming tone of these films, which overlay a white nineteenth-century image of the sublime onto First American traditions. By late mid-century, film consciousness had grown more sophisticated and in *The Axe Fight* by Tim Asch (1968), a study of the Yanomamo peoples of South America, we find a critique and analysis of the realist traditions of the cinema-verité documentary. First we see uncut dailies: a camera roll with the voice of the cameraman interpreting the events as the film runs out. The second time we see the film, there is a discussion of kinship relations of the lead characters and a report of events that happened off-camera, thereby changing and clarifying the meaning of the events we have just witnessed. The third time, we see an edited version in standard film style that reveals to an audience nothing of the complexity of what we now understand. The conclusion is inescapable: cinema is a subjective force in its interrelation with reality. What is real or authentic in film is a construction.

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B/side draws from and critiques assumptions of both fiction and documentary film genres. It utilizes variant modalities of information sources to suggest a portrait of a neighbourhood that could emerge from an interweaving of the public and the private. It suggests a neighbourhood might be constructed not from a set of realist conventions such as we see on the six o'clock news, or in documentary "specials," but rather from a tapestry of personal and historical displacement, most poignantly represented in the space of memory.

If *B/side* multiplies its subject/object positions, it also reconstructs sound and continuity in strategic ways. The track is intended to creatively resonate with the street. Silence is used for energy. There are abrupt alternations of sound and voices, noise and music. The structures are recursive and incomplete, like a song heard in passing. Both song and story are seen/heard as fragments, interrupted to disarm causality and closure. Destruction and decomposition of the linear narrative are here perceived as a construction in action, incomplete, democratic. Aristotelian unities of space and time are foregone for a more complicated relativity that allows the viewer contemplation of the densities of an urban neighbourhood marked by radical construction and change.

History...is not, as it is commonly understood to be, a mode of continuity that defines itself in opposition to the mode of fiction, but a mode of interruption in which the unpredictability and uncontrollability of fiction, acts itself out into reality...¹¹

Melodrama and Narrative

Then fiction is the privileged position?

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The melodrama of Hollywood film and daytime tv offer banal solutions to complex problems. Their plot-oriented and goal-directed scenarios satisfy the expectant wishes of the audience. We feel its power. Is the power of expectation an autonomic process (we salivate) or a visceral consciousness (we chew)? Now, how to interrupt the motor on which we as audiences have been led?

I'm bored as a hostage.

Through fables of identity and empathy scale is humanized; this process exhausts even as it extends humanity.

Peter Brooks speaks, in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, of the rise of melodrama as a signifying aesthetic to a world after the French Revolution, to a world no longer ruled by given sanctities, or ethical fixities. Starting with theatre history at the beginning of the nineteenth century and moving through Balzac and Henry James, Brooks' study takes us to the present and argues that at the heart of the modern lies the melodramatic imagination.¹² He arrives at this conclusion by linking melodrama to the dream and to psychoanalysis and argues that melodrama "exteriorized a world within." For Brooks, melodrama is the secularized form for our era, its growth a response to "the dissipation of the mythic orders that made true tragedy possible."¹³ For Brooks, melodrama is the form of our modern politics, as well as the daytime dramas on our television screens. One might maintain, as well, that melodrama is the basis of narrative cinema altogether.

Both originate in the nineteenth century and both are built on visual gestures. Both traffic in the demonstration of the latent, or silent, meanings in the world. The terms of melodrama have been absorbed into the vocabulary of cinema's cultural coding: the chase, the shoot-out, excessive and coincidental romance, good and evil, the villain and the hero. One only needs to think of innumerable cowboy movies, even so-called spaghetti westerns with the archetypal hero of Clint Eastwood, to recognize the force of the melodramatic tropes: villainy as motor, plot twists and amazing coincidences, a succession of unmaskings, good and evil literalized in clothing, carriage, and character.

For the independent filmmaker late in this century, these codes of melodrama can be dismantled, a series of known assumptive narrative responses that can be reconfigured and yet wield latent emotional power. They are signs

that can be re-ordered productively.

The character wants to leave her part.

Dissection of takes. Invent.

In *B/side*, another kind of complicated melodrama plays itself out daily. The characters are the homeless themselves, the police are the villains who harass them, and the bystanders are extras who walk on. The conflict is exteriorized in the public nature of the encampment. By definition, the homeless body is an exteriorized body that signifies social disorder, even as the classical tropes of the melodrama (virtue, heroes, maidens) are inverted or thwarted and the cathartic closure of a satisfying solution (virtue rewarded, villainy punished, etc.) is frustrated. We are in a realm where histories are lost, secrets remain covert, intentions are falsified and there is no justice. What is left is the iconic drama of the human figure.

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How the face registers what the body forgets. The spectator and the camera are part of the embarrassment. The fragments have their own structure and story time. The characters of conventional melodrama stand in for us. We want to go closer and know their dirty secrets. Paradoxically, in the melodrama, because the characters are not fathomed, have no depth, they are also more real. They offer us a level of abstraction that creates available platforms for our imaginations. To touch that melodramatic icon is to vibrate with the iconic power of human gesture.

In *B/side*, the story is mangled but the characters have something of the power of the golem. The ephemeral moments from the street imbue them with depth and continuity. Spending time deepens them. It is not conventional. The power is from reiteration, not progression. This is actually deeper. There are no clues to climb onto their personal necrorealism. We begin with hints and surfaces. In the end, you suffer an abyss about New York, about homelessness, about revelation. What cannot make sense.

vibration of design icon.

This dramatization works from multiple polarization, possibilities, competing systems. All the voices with no seal at both ends.

Fragmentation and Motive

The fragmentation in the film, then, is not simply a modern “decentring” of consciousness, a lack of a central plenitude, but rather a series of provisional centres through which an alternative organization can occur. Plot

and action are de-dramatized, the coherence of subjectivity is stripped of its significant status, there is evidence of a variegated materialism: calling attention to distance from the camera, to film stocks (whether colour, or black and white), to disparate film eras (the found material intercut with the East Village of the early 1990s). Yet we are not in the realm of the pure play of the signifier, not in the realm of pure surface, nor pure fiction. Reality and fantasy are not separated and in their interweaving, move-
able centres and new definitions of community are temporarily created and imagined.

We find hard evidence that decomposition and distortion indicate a changing harmonic system. Flames organize the delirium. Syntax of film falls against mental illness. In this context, the match cut becomes unreasonable.¹⁴ The homeless are suspended in the world. Intensify their suspension.

*Refuse to set foot
on the double security of Harmony
Intervene in the conflict
of points that contend
in the most rutty of jousts¹⁵*

What is there? Layers of refuse, falling below the world market, sadness, the blank, off the map. The lower depths. Industrial waste. Not comparable to something else. What can contain it? What is its emotive strength? That is enough.

Enough

Bring to the surface the viscera of being homeless. A fractured narrative of world peoples living in the First World. You identify with character. You become on the street. You have no ground. In the latest version, the landscape takes over. You live on this street: fire bombs, rubble lots, a realization of bodies under the sun in overdetermined neglect.

Pull back.

Language is the codification of narrative. Images perform the codification. The audience wants a higher degree of system devices.

We want a story.

I am unconvinced. First I see the world and then the world sees me. The way a mind circles back, wants information. "Our memory repeats to us what we

haven't understood. Repetition is addressed to incomprehension."¹⁶

I want you horrified, despite separation.

The story here is the denied past of unfulfilled wishes. The story is fantasy and seductive for just that reason. The story has the seduction of inevitability. The voyeurism of acculturation.

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We all get to watch.

The whole thing a pretext at the heart of reason, which is why it's so opaque. That excavates the possibility of a sideways motion. Occluded silence. What is it in the broken I'm holding onto?

As if history is accountable.

People try to appear in these scenes. They jump in to be seen. An anti-naturalization matrix: incompatible absolutely, untimely. You work by subtraction, draw all opposing forces.

Immigration umbrella with no capstan.



Endocolonialism

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In describing this project in its early stages, I used the term “endocolonialism.” By which I meant, internal colonialism, colonialism at home. Indeed, endo comes from *in house* (*en dom*). What could be more appropriate to describe a hybrid colonialism born of urban migration, situated at the centre of Metropolis, two miles from Wall Street? The United States has a history of ignoring its own colonialism and imperialism, to not testify to it. Yet, our century has been marked by wars and covert actions of clear imperialist goals.

To reverse Kadiatu Kanneh’s formulation: What I wish to argue is that the preoccupations of the migrant in the city are not so neatly removed from “native” spaces of the (previously) colonized world. “The historical conditions that created both and the discourses that created the identities and the self-consciousness of both remain interlinked.”¹⁷

What does it mean if we view homelessness as an incident of internal colonialism? How does it change our view? Does it not clarify the place of the dispossessed in a state of economic and cultural oppression? Indeed, the encampment’s members were overwhelmingly of Caribbean origin, including Haitian, Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Jamaican.

The Lower East Side, historically liberal, has been a site of waves of immigration in the twentieth century. By mid-century, after World War II, the area experienced increased immigration from the Caribbean. Currently, the newest citizens are Dominican. The divergent groups mark out their territories and economic sites. You will see in the film marks of nationhood, the Puerto Rican flag which serves as an identifying iconography, whether floating from windows, painted on walls, or marking out garden plots.

Central to the film is the image of the Lower East Side as a space that exists between the highly developed First World, represented by the footage of New York City and the underdeveloped Third World, shown in the archival footage. The homeless are largely migrants who have been doubly displaced: once from their homelands and again from their homes. The archival footage I incorporate in *B/side* is used to reference this aspect. Kanneh again, in writing about the African migrant: “Separated from or returned to a homeland (*remembered or dreamed*) her or his position as translator, interlocutor and interpreter through learned languages and politics makes the migrant the inhabitant of a complicated space, both indigenous and foreign, both of the West and alien to it.”¹⁸

This is what we see and experience in Dinkinsville, the name the inhabitants

gave the encampment, referring to Mayor Dinkins, the first black mayor in New York City, who called in the police that June 1991.

The homeless assume the dangerous position of speaking for and representing a native population within the metropolis. Their plight underlines issues of institutional racism, corruption of housing policies and politics, and the permanence of an urban underclass.

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Homelessness and Women

Within the encampment and as homeless, women have a special relation. They are often subject to violence and fear. The film in its video sections evidences this. Repeatedly we see women hit, shoved, and provoked. They are also at times collaborators in their victimization, one of the aspects hardest to watch. The woman who raises her blouse to the men taunting her is the most lurid example. The man attacks from behind, feeling her ass in a casual and insulting manner, even as she presents herself as object.

The bodies are public. There are no roofs, no privacy. The women undress behind improvised walls of blankets; toilets are in the overgrowth in the corners of the lots, returning, if you will, to nature and geography. The state is displaced into its prior shape. People sleep under plastic, nap at all hours. The bedroom is in the front yard. Territory and home are redefined.

In the film, I create an imaginative intimacy with this world, through the character of a fictional homeless woman, Sheila Dabney, whose story is interwoven throughout the documentary stories. The film is structured as a fugue, moving from the inquiring gaze that documents the encampment at a distance, to the fictional space in which characters move through the neighbourhood and their memory. Lovemaking is enacted both to foreground and problematize the issues of the body and privacy. Cleansing of the private body becomes a public act. The city's hydrants become the shower. Towards the end of the encampment's history, cleaning of the public spaces, or territory adjacent to individual tents, became obsessive. People swept the dirt, folded clothes, rebuilt roofs of cloth and porches that reference Caribbean structures. Even as the encampments became marred by drugs, alcohol, and violence, the perseverance and organization of its population was sustained.

The destruction, when it came, was announced in advance. The encampment members themselves set fire to their tents in the early hours of the morning before the bulldozers and riot cops were scheduled to enter. The ensuing destruction paralleled earlier destruction of homelands.

The displacement in history reiterates important memories of forgotten worlds. Later that morning, it was women who gathered their belongings in garment baskets or shopping carts to wheel away the remnants of home. Women remain tied to the domestic, to sex and children, even without a home. Men “fix” junk on the streets, threaten and react with anger. The film shows a neighbourhood teeming with life, quotidian summer.

180 The figure of Sheila Dabney operates as the observer of this world, as well as one who is in it. She participated actively in the film, setting up shots on occasion. Her figure gives us a critical position or entry into the film. She appears as if watching herself, which forces us, perhaps, to view ourselves through her, so that empathy is reconfigured critically, involving as well a repositioning of identity. This repositioning occurs, especially, I would like to argue, for women viewers.

Politics

The film is political, personal, and aesthetic. The zone of the poetic is exercised to become a social critique. A radical fragmentation to enact the breakage of a world.

*you have no ground
you are sleeping in the gutter
contained whispers between genres*

This one subjective (inside the door). Energy meeting energy, coming to ripeness and settling in darkness. People fall out of the world.

Any Idea of filmmaking must go.

The blanks in the film become the silence of what is not said, of what cannot be said, of the distance between parts of the film, of slippage.

*Give up to delirium. Give up distance.
Increase in social conscience and revolutionary
syntax, without abuse.*

Imagination doesn't work through identification, but rather through difference. What interests you in the unequal portions, irregular fragments, fascination with parts?

*their silences
their resistances*

The story runs beside itself, until the moment of its arrival which neglects you. So I create something unstable and digressive, until the original pictures design new names you think in. The increasing horror is of representation, hopelessly fixed in simulacra of waking, or that which is un-representable, outside representation, or threatening to collapse representation, showing representation's limitations.

Carnal desperation: *We're in bodies*
and not some mediocre narrative flyby

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Below the grid of industrial waste
below the waste of industrial grit
mental illness comes up.

Homelessness in the 1980s in the urban centres of the United States could be mapped by looking at social legislation and housing development in the inner cities. Throughout the 1980s, mental hospitals were shut down, with avowedly reformist goals. Nonetheless there was no systematic development of services for the released. This historic legislation, in combination with urban gentrification which in Manhattan targeted the SROs (single room occupancies) of the Upper West Side and the inexpensive tenements of the Lower East, resulted in increased numbers of people living on the city streets, people particularly unprepared to meet the challenges of the explosive inflationary housing market at that time. The mayors, Koch, Dinkins, and Giuliani, each contributed to dehistoricize events by wagging police batons at the homeless. What was denied or left undiscussed were the pressures, both economic and cultural, that fed into and created the crises.

the delirium of the situation:
impoverished black men
under trees, dirt cops
returning to a theme

Destruction of homeland parallels destruction of Dinkinsville. The displacement in history reiterates important memories of forgotten worlds.

I don't watch tv and I know everything

Feel gravity of body and that means a sensuous response to details, skin and bodies, bodies and faces.

When cut works, experience becomes language, making switches synapse in mind parallels.

Not a film about something.

Let memory be the documentary horror—a more terroristic rather than sentimental motor.

Not a/b/a/b/a/b/a but a/b/a/a/c/d/a, not simple alternation, but a torque

182 to attend disposition of sentient things.

Twists rubble into black
selfless in delirium

Language here cannot be descriptive: a sustained hole without event chapters.

Complete integration between street and narrative

out of heel-to-toe relations
BACK WALL FALLS OUT

More orchestrated, more interlocked—a mosaic

sunlight echoes
additional muscle (homeless intercut)
wheel comes out of the bicycle

A selection of instants, mysterious, ungratified, unfixed in audio and rhythm.

At one point, the dollies are in suspension (are homeless). At end, they become the main fabric. The figure ground reverses. The slippage by vehicle becomes a vehicle of slippage. Inverted to signal a new kind of language—perform a lateral slide to find her on bench.

Muscles unlocked
Sound growing
Possible cities
In front of you
Open cities
Night over day
Number skin
Outer space
Not anything resembling paradise

One would like to say

the understory becomes the overstory.

One says

you are there on the street.

A local participant, a member of the neighbourhood, a witness with a camera. Not subsuming the other in a totalizing gesture, but interrogating the frame and perspective. Eschewing language, *B/side* creates a "kaleidoscopic sensorium of the urban body."¹⁹ But still, is the production of art here merely a consumption of this experience? This question lurks inside and outside the film.

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In crisis, there is no scaffolding of person; only a species, of which you are a member destroying a species, of which you are a member

You have no ground.

We are all object

Limbs at this distance define you as difference

which is what I recognize (deflected)(twice). This is the break in identity across which difference approaches—inviting, enticing (You)

Seen Unspoken

Defined Unchanged

The act of Them eludes us

The act of Us eludes them.

not apart we are, but that part we are.

Film is a medium that expands the capacity for witnessing. It potentially creates multiple positionalities, and in doing so interrogates its own authenticity. The camera invades a world, and in its representation of that world inevitably leaves gaps, splices. The process measures distance even as it offers evidence, and suggests, at its most generous, new forms of vision and new demands for the audience. The combination of narrative speculation, factual report and silence in *B/side* creates a historical document that reads as translation, open to new ways of meeting the neighbourhood, its interactions and its marginal communities. The film exemplifies cinema's potential to render social issues complexly, even as it helps us imagine new potentials of community and agency in the midst of great economic imbalance.





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