

# A Whited Sepulchre



**Autobiography and video diaries in 'post-documentary' culture**



Thesis submitted for the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) Examination

by

Tony Dowmunt – Goldsmiths, University of London

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**The following text is exactly as submitted submitted for my PhD, with the exception of a few typographical corrections and a new Appendix (4) which reproduces the Examiners' comments.**

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**Abstract:**

This is a PhD project partly about my class and ethnic background and consciousness: how I have lived them as a white man and a documentary filmmaker, and how they are connected to the ghost of my great-grandfather, who was a soldier in the British Army in Sierra Leone in the 1880s.

But it is also a project about autobiographical documentary filmmaking, and is submitted for examination in two main components: the first a video-diary based film (*A Whited Sepulchre*) in which I investigated the form/genre of the video diary by making one myself - filmmaking as a research method; the second, a text which has an independent relationship to the film - not one of 'illustration, description or explication' but hopefully of 'expansive enrichment' (Trinh T. Minh-Ha quoted in McLaughlin & Pearce (eds) 2007: 107).

*A Whited Sepulchre* is a video which draws on the stories of two journeys: my great-grandfather's account of his posting to Sierra Leone, and my own 'video diary' of a trip that I made in December/January 2004-5, following in his footsteps but seeking a different understanding of Africa and of myself as a white 'Englishman'.

The (written) textual component maps the intellectual and creative terrain that the project as a whole explores. It includes a survey of first-person and autobiographical film and video making in the context of contemporary media, but also makes a case for writing autobiographically, ranging across my family history before focusing on my own formation both as a white man from a particular class, and as a filmmaker and video-diarist.

The text concludes with an argument - at odds with some postmodern orthodoxies - advocating the cultural and political importance of a 'sincere' and direct mode of autobiographical address.

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## Acknowledgments:

This project has been a preoccupation of mine, in different forms, for a number of decades, so my first thanks must go to my partner Jane Foot, who has both put up with and encouraged it, for almost the last two decades – and was crucial in getting me out of Sierra Leone alive!

During the production and editing of *A Whited Sepulchre* I was supported by a wide range of friends and colleagues (most of whom are thanked at the end of the film). At Goldsmiths, during the writing of this thesis, I have been helped enormously by my three supervisors, Bill Schwarz, David Morley and Robert Smith, and encouraged in invaluable ways, among others, by Sara Ahmed, Chris Berry, James Curran, Janet Harbord, Julian Henriques, Judy Holland, Peter Lee-Wright, Angela Phillips, Jane Stobart and Graham Young.

Although autobiography is, almost of necessity, a solitary and private preoccupation, it has in my experience been a way for me to make contact with other people (those mentioned above and in the film, and many, many more), and my warm thanks go to them all for their contributions to this project.

# **Part 1:**

## **Introduction**

## 1a) *A Whited Sepulchre*

'I remember ... Ah yes, returning after twenty five years, how white and clear the house stood out from a distance.' (Fraser 1984: 3)

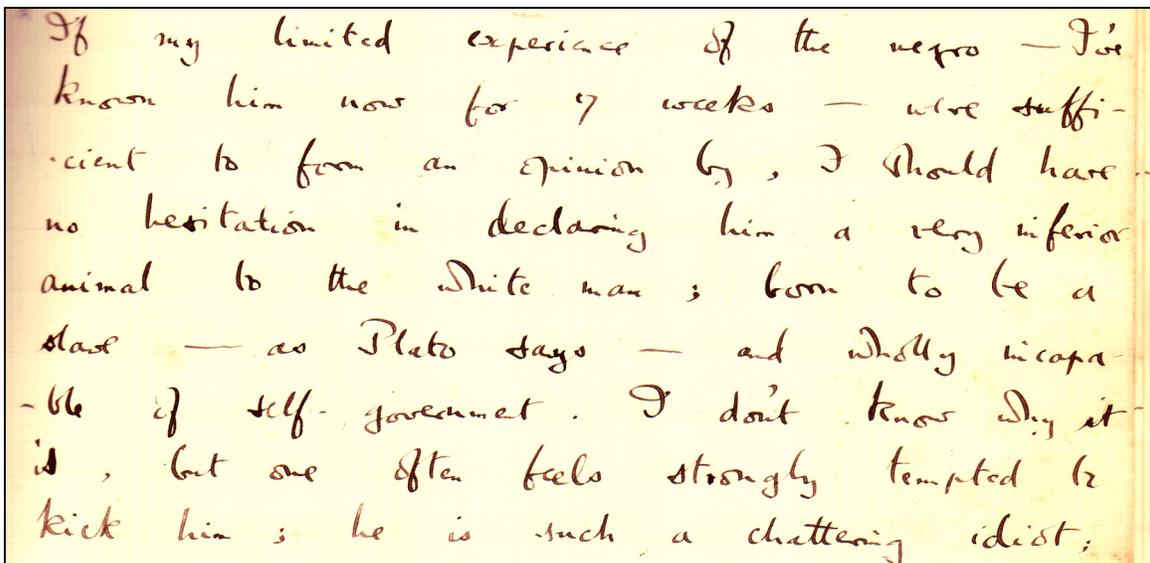
This sentence in Ronald Fraser's memoir *In Search of a Past* thrilled me with the excitement of recognition when I first read it. Like Fraser, I was brought up in a large white house in the country, and I too approached it from the distance, glimpsing it from a lane on the other side of a gentle Sussex valley; this was during the few adult visits I have made back there - trying to understand the residual, uncomfortable feelings I still had about my childhood. It's the whiteness against the green of the trees that still stands out in my memory.



Fig. 1

My mother had inherited this house from her grandfather, Arthur Kerr Slessor (whom I'll call AK from now on). When I was a teenage boy I found AK's handwritten diaries in an old bookcase, in a dark corner of the downstairs room on the left hand side of the house in the picture above (Fig. 1). Two of the vellum-bound volumes covered his time in the late 1880s and early 1890s as a soldier in Africa. Since I found them, the diaries have hovered in the background of my consciousness, posing awkward questions: how am I like him (as well as hostile

to him)? How are we linked – as well as separated – by our differing masculinities, ethnicities, class origins and orientations? I was immediately gripped by the realisation of my physical, familial connection to this man, many of whose opinions horrified me: I remember finding a sheet of his pink blotting paper at the end of one of the volumes, with blurred mirror impressions of his neat handwriting imprinted on it, and imagining him, in the West African heat, carefully dabbing with the paper what he had just written in dark ink. Amongst other things, the diaries are both a detailed account of AK's daily life as an army officer and a frank record of his initial, brief questioning, then whole-hearted, even fanatical, embrace, of the racism underpinning British colonial rule:



If my limited experience of the negro – I've known him now for 7 weeks – were sufficient to form an opinion by, I should have no hesitation in declaring him a very inferior animal to the white man; born to be a slave – as Plato says – and wholly incapable of self-government. I don't know why it is, but one often feels strongly tempted to kick him; he is such a chattering idiot;

Fig. 2: AK's diary

However, there is little hint of these feelings when he describes his arrival in Africa in November 1888. He gazes onto the shore from his ship moored off the Sierra Leonean coast:

This country is clothed with luxuriant vegetation, and strikes you from a distance as being bright green. If Sierra Leone is the white man's grave, it is certainly a whited sepulchre, very fair to look upon outside. However before long, I shall have plenty of opportunity of seeing whether there is anything particularly foul within the fair exterior.

The curious phrase 'a whited sepulchre' rang a bell each time I read it, and then I remembered where I'd read it before: in *Heart of Darkness* as Marlow is

... crossing the Channel to show myself to my employers, and sign the contract. In a very few hours I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre. Prejudice no doubt. I had no difficulty in finding the Company's offices. It was the biggest thing in the town and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an oversea empire, and make no end of coin by trade. (Conrad 1996: 24)

These two uses of the phrase (Conrad's and AK's) were written within a decade of each other, and of course reference a verse from the Bible, in which the scribes and Pharisees are called

hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. (The Gospel According to St Matthew Chapter 23, v. 27)

I was struck by the coincidence of my great-grandfather and Conrad using the same phrase, with its sense of whiteness hypocritically covering the dirt and darkness of death. They were describing two geographical locations that, although very different, were united by their relationship to colonial adventure and exploitation. The differences seemed significant too: Conrad locates the hypocrisy in Europe, whereas for AK it is the beautiful surface of Africa that potentially hides something darker. He would not have recognised any truth in Marlow's comparison of the Congo with the River Thames at the time of the Roman Empire, earlier in *Heart of Darkness*: 'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth' (1996: 19). AK would not have appreciated this parallel, and any uneasiness he may have felt about the British Imperial enterprise he was serving he projects, in his diaries, onto Africa and Africans, leaving his English home green and sanitized, white and virtuous.

What also struck me was that - because of my family connection to AK, and my growing up in his house (our own 'whited sepulchre') - I could not avoid my own intimate connection to colonial history. However much I chose anti-imperialist political beliefs, however much I despised and rejected 'the British Empire', I was

born into it, and knew that this birthright had psychic consequences for me. In a different post-imperial context Stuart Hall describes similar consequences in the pain he experienced when his parents, following their own particular colonial heritage, forbade his sister to pursue a relationship with a young black man, and so caused her to have a nervous breakdown: 'It broke down forever, for me, the distinction between the public and private self' (Morley & Chen 1996: 488). My own history has been maybe less traumatic, no doubt because I have enjoyed a more privileged position as a white man in relation to the power structures of colonialism. Nevertheless, with Hall, I can't avoid connecting my private and public selves, and I don't

understand why people thought [...] structural questions were not connected with the psychic – with emotions and identifications and feelings because, for me, those structures are things that you live (488).

For me too then, at the heart of this project are the blurred boundaries and loosened distinctions between the social and the psychic, public and private selves. The British Empire is now commonly thought of as part of history, rather than a current reality. But, as Paul Gilroy comments, '[t]he hidden, shameful store of imperial horrors has been an unacknowledged presence in British political and cultural life during the second half of the twentieth century' (2004: 102). However hidden, the 'emotions and identifications' engendered by imperial and colonial history are still with us, and I want to argue here, within us. The continuing national debates over the last few decades about 'immigration', 'multi-culturalism' or 'asylum seekers', as well as the quasi-imperial military adventures in the Falkland Islands, Iraq and Afghanistan, all attest to their survival in various contested forms within British culture. This is reflected in the way in which 'Europe stands today militarized once again and heavily fortified against its proliferating enemies, within and without' (Gilroy 2004: 155). It's not over yet. For many of us in the UK there is still 'a small pink map at the heart of things' (Whitlock 2000: 7) and, as Edward Said puts it, 'the legacy of empire [...] sits like a menacing and metastasising cancer just beneath the skin of our contemporary

lives' (2003: 5). In these circumstances Said advocates that people writing about the empire do so from 'a perspective derived from experience, a personal stake', because, he says, 'the worst thing - even in the name of critical impartiality - is to empty that history of its existential residue in the present' (ibid).

So this is a project about the ways in which 'those structures are things that you live' – how I have lived them as a white man and a filmmaker, connected to the ghost of my great-grandfather. Alisa Lebow asks:

do we call up our cultural ghosts, or do they call on us? Is not the latter likely, where in the process of being called upon (to represent, to represent ourselves, to represent ourselves in certain ways, using certain, very specific tropes), we are interpellated into the body of (cultural) knowledge we think of as our (contested) self? (2008: 141-2)

When I was awarded a Fellowship in 2003<sup>1</sup>, I seized the opportunity to put my 'contested self' and AK's diaries, at the heart of the project: throughout my adult life I had felt AK's ghost calling me and, as a filmmaker I had sought ways to use (and exorcise) the diaries in my work. Now I had a way to try – both materially through the Fellowship, and filmically through the 'trope' of the video diary form, which I was being funded to explore. I decided to go to Sierra Leone, to re-trace some of the steps AK had made there more than a century earlier, and make my own video diary of the experience.

I wrote most of the text you are reading now after making the film, to try make sense of this filmmaking process, and at the same time to make an argument about the significance of an autobiographical way of working (both writing and filmmaking). It inevitably bounces between discussion of ideas, social and political facts 'external' to me, and my own personal responses and subjectivity. I am following a method suggested by Alisa Lebow when she says, in the

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<sup>1</sup> An Arts and Humanities Research Council Fellowship in The Creative and Performing Arts, to do practice-based research into autobiographical documentary and video diaries.

introduction to her recent book on first-person Jewish filmmaking, that there is a particular 'value in pursuing a study of the representation of subjectivity from one's own situated subjectivity' (2008: xviii).

## **1 b) *A Whited Sepulchre* as a 'practice research' project: methodologies**

This text – the printed artefact you are holding in your hands right now – forms only about one half of this PhD thesis as a whole. The other elements are all on the accompanying DVD<sup>2</sup>. The contents of the DVD are as follows:

- *A Whited Sepulchre* (the whole film, viewable as such, but also chapterised for ease of reference in this thesis text);
- Other video material, extracts from which I used in the *Whited Sepulchre* film - for instance my 'home movie' *The Sheep* and a longer extract from *A Change of Mind* (the therapy film);
- Other video material cited in the text that follows – (eg clips from *Girls, Girls, Girls* video diaries or *Arizona Dreaming* – my 'video diary' journey film about the Navaho lands in Arizona);
- A 'Diary' version of *A Whited Sepulchre* with reproductions of the AK's written diary extracts I used in the film (to enable the viewer/reader to see how I have used/abused them in the editing process).

With the exception of the *Whited Sepulchre* film, most of these features are, in effect, audio-visual footnotes and appendices to the written part of the thesis. Because they are in audio-visual form they obviously bring something to the text which written words are unable to: nevertheless their relationship to the text is

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<sup>2</sup> There are detailed instructions on how to use the DVD in Appendix 3, p. 201, below.

primarily illustrative and instrumental. This is not as true of the *Whited Sepulchre* film, which exists autonomously from this text (as the text does from the film, in many respects), and both text and film together are part of the overall 'theoretical' enquiry – different ways 'of knowing related phenomena'<sup>3</sup>. Trinh T. Minh-Ha talks about this distinction in relation to her own practices of filmmaking and writing:

I theorise *with* [original emphasis] my films, not *about* [original emphasis] them. The relationship between the verbal, the musical and the visual, just like the relationship between theory and practice, is not one of illustration, description or explication. It can be one of inquiry, displacement and expansive enrichment. The verbal forms a parallel track and is another creative dimension (quoted in McLaughlin & Pearce (eds) 2007: 107).

My aspiration is that the relationship of the following text to the film (and vice versa) in this project is one of a similar 'expansive enrichment'. Elsewhere Minh-Ha describes how in the commentary in her film *Naked Spaces – Living is Round*

I do not intend to speak about  
Just speak nearby (1992: 96).

This expresses well the relationship I'm looking for between my film and this text: not to speak 'about' each other, but nearby, giving each expressive mode its autonomy. Neither of them has an instrumental (expositional or illustrative) relationship to the other. However, for the relationship they do have with each other to work at its best, I would strongly suggest that, before returning to this text, you view *A Whited Sepulchre* in its entirety on the DVD<sup>4</sup> now - if you have not done so already.

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<sup>3</sup> David MacDougall's phrase describing the relationship of visual and written anthropology (1998: 63).

<sup>4</sup> Press 'Play Documentary' on the DVD menu.

## 1 c) Structure and content of the (written) thesis

There are two main sections in what you are about to read:

- Part 2, the 'Contextual Review', maps the intellectual and creative terrain that this project explores. It includes an argument for writing autobiographically, a brief survey of the ways in which writing (and by implication filmmaking) from and about the 'self' are problematic, and a survey of first-person and autobiographical film and video making, finally contextualised in our contemporary 'post-documentary' moment.
- Part 3 is more personal and directly autobiographical. It ranges across family biography (particularly of my mother and AK, her grandfather), and the implications of this in my own life, then focuses more particularly on my formation, both as a white man from a particular class, and as a filmmaker and video-diarist.

The juxtaposition and blending of these two styles (the more 'academic' in part 2, and the more 'personal' in part 3) are at the heart of what I'm trying to do here, trying to bridge in the writing what Alisa Lebow calls 'the differing rhetorical positions occupied by the autobiographical *I* and the autocritical *I*' (2008: xxx). Despite the difficulties of this project, I remain convinced of the absolute necessity of trying to speak from both positions at more or less the same time, because, to recall Hall's argument, of the ineluctable connection of structural questions with the psychic. Speaking from the 'I' is important because, as Judith Butler puts it, although 'the "I" does not stand apart from the prevailing matrix of ethical norms and conflicting moral frameworks', nevertheless

We cannot conclude that the "I" is simply the effect or the instrument of some prior ethos or some field of conflicting or discontinuous norms.

When the "I" seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration: indeed, when the "I" seeks to

give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist (2005: 7-8).

I'm not trying, in this thesis as a whole (film and text), to speak as a 'social theorist'. However, I hope that, in giving an account of myself, both through my implication both in my family's history and in that of the documentary form (and in particular its relation to current issues in its development), I'm contributing to theorising documentary in ways that include showing the conditions of my own emergence as a filmmaker.

In part 4, I bring the issues suggested by the project as a whole to a conclusion by (re-)asserting the significance of indexicality for the documentary project, particularly in its autobiographical form - arguing that a relatively uncomplicated projection of a more or less coherent self in first-person filmmaking is a valid contemporary political project.

# **Part 2:**

# **Contextual review**

## 2 a) Autobiography (as research method)

So why the hubris of such self-declaration? (Sreberny 2002: 304)

*19/12/04 – 2pm – on the beach at Lakka (Sierra Leone, West Africa)... after eating a fish kebab with chips, lime juice and ketchup, swallowed down with a Star beer, writing in the shade under a straw canopy, listening to the waves lap the sand shore... my mind (once again) turning to the issue of 'justifying autobiography'. Why put your (my) self in the story? I go along with Vanergeim [sic], about those who talk about revolution without simultaneously looking at transforming everyday life – such people are talking with corpses in their mouths<sup>5</sup>... I'm an extremist in relation to myself: when I listen to, join in with, or initiate abstract conversation/ thinking/analysis that is divorced from my experience of everyday life – I start to taste the dead flesh on my tongue ... the autobiographical expression of everyday experience is the ground of any 'thinking' that has any hope of being transformative, of communicating to others, of speaking from one body to the next.*

This (slightly drunken) rant is a verbatim extract from the (written) diary I kept intermittently during my trip to Sierra Leone. Despite its assertive tone, right now I am a little uncertain. Starting a chapter of academic writing in autobiographical mode still feels risky, although in fact it is within a tradition (at least) a quarter of a century old. In 1982 Angela McRobbie wrote that it was central to the politics of feminist research: 'Feminism forces us to locate our own auto-biographies and our experience inside the questions we might want to ask ...' (52). A decade later Mica Nava spent most of the introduction of her book on feminism, youth and consumerism describing, from her own experience, 'the influence of the cultural and psychic history of the author' (1992: 1). She makes the point that this 'kind of work'

always emerges from the author's embeddedness in a specific configuration of inextricably intertwined historical, cultural and psychic narratives (6).

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<sup>5</sup> The actual Vaniegem (sic) quotation is: 'People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth' (Gray 1998: 26).

and goes on to write autobiographically on her 'formation as an author and a feminist'. Of course, Stuart Hall has also written extensively about identity, often from his personal experience of being a migrant. In a symposium on 'The Real Me' at the ICA in 1987, he answered the 'classic question' put to migrants ('Why are you here?') with an arresting autobiographical statement: 'The truth is, I am here because it's where my family is not. I really came here to get away from my mother ...' (Hall 1987: 44)<sup>6</sup>; and when responding at a conference in 1990 to the 'opportunity for a moment of self-reflection on cultural studies as a practice' he decided 'I've got to speak autobiographically. [...] It is an attempt to say something about what certain theoretical moments in cultural studies have been like for me, and from that position, to take some bearings about the general question of the politics of theory' (1992: 277). David Morley also introduces us to his mother at the beginning of his book about home, reporting her scepticism when she first heard about what he was writing: "'Home!! What does he know about it? He's hardly been here since he was eighteen".' As he goes on to say, '... all theory, one way or another, has its roots in autobiography' (2000: 1).

Valerie Walkerdine has also used a strong autobiographical presence in her work - in particular her growing up as a girl 'in the post-war British working class', and hence her sensitivity to ways in which 'ordinary working people [...] have been sold down the river [...] by an intellectual left' (1997: 5), whom she sees as examining her class as 'other', from the outside. Her writing practice is, as a consequence, often both autobiographical and more inclusive of different modes than many academic texts, including, in one book, 'fantasies of my own childhood [...] articles, fragments of more personal notes, together with poems and images' (1991: xiv). Elsewhere she suggests that

it is an impossible task to avoid the place of the subjective in research,  
and that, instead of making futile attempts to avoid something which

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<sup>6</sup> This resonated with me particularly because my trip to West Africa for this project was to get away (metaphorically) from my family's (and especially my mother's) culture and influence.

cannot be avoided, we should think more carefully about how to utilise our subjectivity as part of the research process (1997: 59).

Luisa Passerini mixes poetic accounts of her own subjectivity and psychic processes (in psychoanalysis) with oral history in her account of the '68 generation in Italy, justifying the 'complementary nature of my two undertakings' as follows:

If I had not heard the life stories of the generation of '68 I would not have been able to write about myself: those stories have nourished mine, giving it the strength to get to its feet and to speak. But I couldn't have borne them, in their alternation of being too full and too empty, if I had not confronted myself and my history with the double motion of analysis and of the exercise of remembering. (1996: 124)

Elsbeth Probyn also inserts her personal story into what she is writing about. She describes her book *Blush: faces of shame* paradoxically as 'perhaps the most personal book I've written and also the most objective' (2005: xviii). It includes a wealth of autobiographical material - many descriptions of 'moments of shame' (2005: 1) - for instance her description of a visit to Uluru/Ayers Rock in central Australia as a white woman tourist in an Aboriginal sacred site (2005: 41-45, 71-72), and a long passage in which she quotes and discusses a poem written by her grandmother (115-125), and tells her story: 'I call it her story, but it is also mine. My shame has brought us together in strange ways'<sup>7</sup> (115).

However, the autobiographical method can be made to work with much less apparently personal material, as Annabelle Sreberny demonstrates in her wonderfully titled essay 'Globalization and Me', answering her own question 'why the hubris of such self-declaration?':

The literature on globalization is an abstract, masculist and public discourse, and thus we are invited to think of the processes of globalization in the same way. A more immediate, personal, experiential,

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<sup>7</sup> A phrase which chimes with my own sense of how my shame brought me together with AK.

supposedly feminized voice might try to anchor abstract processes in particular lives, exploring both at the same time (2002: 293).

A focus on the personal, on 'particular lives' (and hence a concern with the autobiographical) has then clearly been central to feminist scholarship – but not confined to it. Nick Couldry's book *Inside Culture* is partially (but also centrally) concerned with the place of 'the individual "in" culture'(44). In a section entitled 'Speaking personally' he writes 'I need to say something of the personal history that brought me to write this book' (16) and asks 'what is the relationship between my cultural experience as an individual and the "culture" within which I was formed?' (45), concluding that

Taking seriously each person's reflexivity about their place in culture is a necessity, not a luxury: it may involve reassessing what we think of as the central 'stories' of a particular culture or time (55).

There is clearly more at stake in the issue of the 'the individual "in" culture' for those of us with diasporic identities, and Ien Ang describes how her book *On Not Speaking Chinese* 'is to a certain extent auto-biographical, in that it is in large part a reflection on my own experience as a multiple migrant' (2001: 4) – an experience she earlier characterised as that of 'an ethnic Chinese, Indonesian-born and European-educated academic who now lives and works in Australia' (3).

Most of the authors cited above work, broadly speaking, within a 'cultural studies' tradition. However, this kind of autobiographical reflexivity has also been present in much recent anthropological writing (Clifford & Marcus 1986, Geertz 1988), although seen as threatening to 'the canons of the discipline' because of its explicit attack on positivism. The reflexive I of the ethnographer subverts the idea of the observer as impersonal machine. The autobiographical insertion is different from the stamp of the author's authority: not simply 'I was there', but the self and category who the others confronted, received and confided in (Okely 1992: 24).

Ruth Behar, in her evocatively titled book *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*, defines anthropological work in a very personal way as a 'voyage through a long tunnel' (1996: 2) encountering along the journey

Loss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something... (3)

Substitute 'filming' for 'writing', and this serves as an unnervingly accurate description of some of my more anxious feelings while shooting *A Whited Sepulchre* in Sierra Leone. In her previous book, an anthropological study of a Mexican woman, Esperanza, Behar concludes with an autobiographical chapter telling 'the story of how I came to be able to write the story of a less privileged woman's life' (1993: 323), of how, as a Cuban-born, 'second-rate gringa' she refuses 'to speak from a position of unsituated authority'. As we will see, this refusal is a notable feature of the impulse to autobiographical film- and video diary-making, with their aesthetics of highly situated subjectivity,

Hopefully too, all the voices cited above are sufficient to attest to the usefulness (and sometimes the inescapable necessity) of the personal, autobiographical voice in the wider, social project of cultural enquiry or generating knowledge. As Liz Stanley states: 'all knowledge is autobiographically-located in a particular social context of experiencing and knowing' (1991: 210). Indeed, speaking (and writing or filming) autobiographically, or at least explicitly from our selves, may be our only honest option left to us in post-modernity, when we are all in a similar position to Clifford's ethnographers, who

are more and more like the Cree hunter who (the story goes) came to Montreal to testify in court concerning the fate of his hunting lands in the new James Bay hydroelectric scheme. He would describe his way of life.

But when administered the oath he hesitated: "I'm not sure I can tell the whole truth ... I can only tell what I know". (Clifford in Clifford & Marcus 1986: 8)

## 2b) The problematic self

However, post-modernism (along with psychoanalytical theory, post-structuralism and contemporary feminisms) raises further problems in relation to the 'I' that can 'only tell' what s/he knows. In Morwenna Griffiths' words 'Who or what am I? That is, how did I come to be myself? And, Is what I take to be my self, my real self?' (1995: 75). It is now commonplace to hear that selfhood

is flexible, fractured, fragmented, decentred and brittle. Such a conception of individual identity is probably the central outlook in current social and political thought (Elliot 2007: 8).

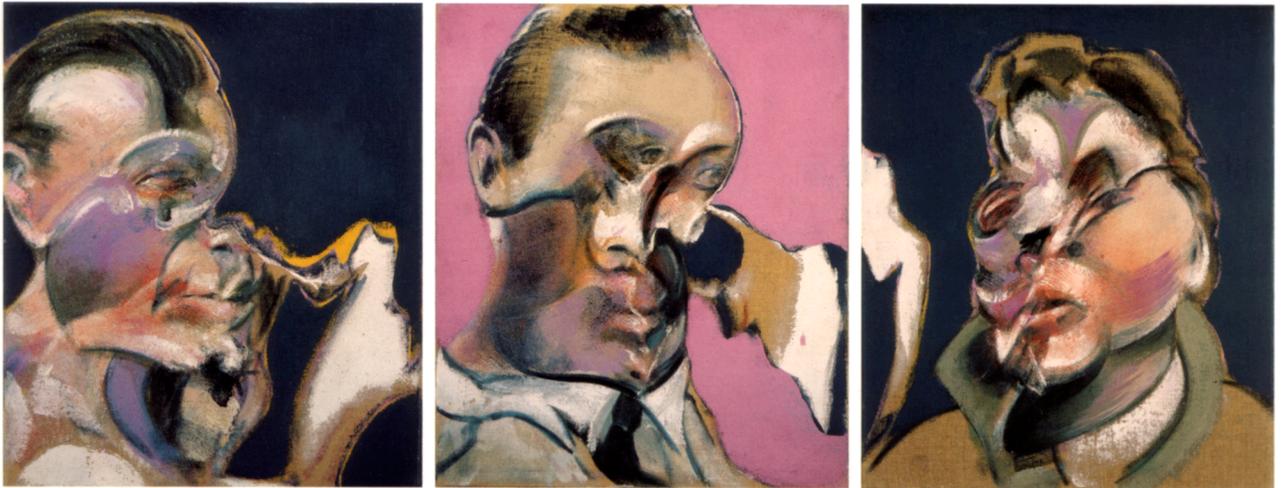


Fig. 3: Francis Bacon: Three Studies for Portraits Including Self-Portrait

In Nava's discussion of her use of autobiography she acknowledges that the focus on the self that this use entails is problematic in current post-modern times when

The idea of the integrated and unified subject, and of the possibility of truth and moral justice find decreasing support, particularly within the academy. Feminists too are now much more inclined to acknowledge specificity, complexity, fragmentation, and not knowing, whether they adopt a position that more fully embraces postmodernism or not (1992: 4).

I do not intend here to plunge headlong into the contemporary debates about the self in all their complexity, merely to take quick dips into those areas of particular relevance to my themes, and to the/my self who is exploring them. For the most part I take a pragmatic position: my self is clearly fragmented, contingent and fluid, but this does not invalidate my personal agency or useful self-consciousness. Therefore I choose to work to some extent in defiance of the tendencies of some poststructuralist theories that have ‘undermined the assumptions of humanism and posited instead a divided subject, debarred from self-knowledge by the unconscious or by language’ (Anderson 2001: 17). As Morwenna Griffiths puts it: ‘In order to organise<sup>8</sup> you need to know who you are – even though “who you are” is in a state of change’ (1995: 188).

A brief summary of what I can say I know about myself goes like this: I am in my late 50s, a white man from a privileged upper middle-class British background<sup>9</sup>. I currently live in a heterosexual partnership in North London, and have a daughter (now in her 20s) from a previous relationship. I was educated in fee-paying boarding schools, then at the University of Oxford in the early 1970s, where I encountered the counter-cultural politics of the post-’68 period. Hanif Kureishi, three years younger than me, describes coming ‘to some sort of self- and political consciousness in the 1970’s, a particularly ideological time of aggressive self-description’ (2004: 2). So this was a time in which we thrust our ‘selves’ and our personal identities to the fore in social and political life:

Selfhood was now also coming to mean disaffection, rebellion, discontinuity and difference ... [and was] fundamental to the attempts of people – women, gays, blacks and subalterns of all kinds – to question the status quo and change the direction of society (Elliot 2007: 16).

I subsequently have made a career as a community media activist, and documentary filmmaker and teacher, but many of the values of the late ‘60s and

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<sup>8</sup> Or indeed, write a text or make a film.

<sup>9</sup> On my mother’s side: my father was Polish, settling in the UK after the Second World War. I often speculate that some of my rejection of the national and class values of my upbringing derives from my very early sense of his ‘otherness’. See 3b below.

'70s still shape me: a libertarian socialist politics inflected by encounters with feminism, anti-racism and humanistic psychotherapy. All of these encounters and identities have also, of course, been part of the formation of this current project (research, filmmaking and this thesis) and I will explore some of them as the ground and context from which the work springs, in Chapter 3c below. At the same time, and with some regret, I am aware, with Nava, that 'The simplicity of the emancipatory project and the utopian imaginings of the early 1970s no longer carry conviction' (1992: 4). Nevertheless, I am not at all sure that the relevance, indeed the necessity, of emancipatory and utopian thinking, in the circumstances of this new century, has in any substantial way diminished.

What will also be immediately obvious from the above autobiographical summary is that I'm in a questionable subject position in relation to current arguments about the autobiographical self, or even the self itself. As Bev Skeggs points out:

Personhood and selfhood are both a product of, and produce, class inequality. Claiming selfhood can be seen as performative of class, as selfhood brings into effect entitlements not only denied to others, but reliant on others being made available both as a resource and a constitutive limit (2004: 152).

As I am engaged in a project with its roots in Imperial adventure in Africa, the 'others' on whom I am reliant are constituted within racial, as well as class, inequalities. I am also able, by virtue of my gender, class and ethnicity, to draw on what Sidonie Smith calls 'male autobiographical authority' (1987: 43).

Smith is highly critical of 'formal "autobiography"' because it privileges 'the autonomous or metaphysical self as the agent of its own achievement' (39), telling stories in which 'The boy would become man ... "Autobiography", then, is ultimately an assertion of arrival and embeddedness in the phallic order' (40).

Egan echoes this when she suggests that autobiography 'has been inflexible; it has remained too closely bound to the classical nineteenth-century forms of teleological, heroic (white, male, imperialist), singular and linear narrative to admit of variations' (1994: 598).

So autobiography, or at least traditional autobiographical practices, have been critiqued (but also to some extent have been recuperated and partially freed from the 'phallic order') by a large number of feminist critics like Smith<sup>10</sup>. The issue of autobiography's relationship to black people - to colonialism's 'others' - is as complex and contested. Bart Moore-Gilbert holds that 'the genre betrays a significant degree of complicity with what is now understood as colonial discourse' (1996: 2), and concludes his analysis of Western autobiography with the suggestion that 'the genre has always been dependent on the non-West for constitution of the Self at key moments of its evolution' (10). This is perhaps most obvious in much autobiographical travel writing from the Victorian period on, imbued with what Mary Louise Pratt characterises as 'the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene' (1992: 205).

The placing of the sovereign white man - 'the monarch-of-all-I-survey' - at the centre of the autobiographical genre has also led to some critics assuming, in parallel, that "authentic" non-Western autobiography was impossible' (Gabara 2003: 333). Gabara argues against the notion that autobiography is peculiar to Western, individualistic cultures, a notion propagated in Olney's work on African autobiography, which he characterises 'less as an individual phenomenon ... than a social one' (1973: viii). This view springs from the notion that 'an African subject, as opposed to a Western one, is not individually, but rather socially determined' (Gabara 2003: 333). Clyde Taylor reinforces this idea of the African subject in his discussion of African Cinema as a 'hero-less narrative', by opposing the Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am' to the Xhosa proverb 'A person is a person only because of other people' (1989: 90 & 106 – quoted in Gabara 2003: 334).

However, these polarities - between the individual and the collective, the personal and the social - may tell us more about the Western cultures that have articulated them than the 'non-West's' imagined (in)capacity for autobiographical

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<sup>10</sup> See also Anderson 2001, Griffiths 1995, Kuhn 1995, Stanley 1992, Whitlock 2000.

expression. As less polarised and more nuanced perspectives on the self have emerged, so have new and varied accounts of the genre and its relationship to imperialism. Gillian Whitlock's book *The Intimate Empire* is about autobiographical writing by women from a range of backgrounds, all touched by colonialism. It is

about the projection of the self in autobiography through complex negotiations, manoeuvres and display. 'Intimacy' relates to the incorporation of the body in these tactics, and about how deeply, personally embedded colonization and resistance are in thinking and writing about the self – a small pink map at the heart of things (2000: 7).

'Although autobiography seems to stabilize truth and the subject who utters it, this is an illusion', Whitlock says. For this reason she is interested in giving

precedence to reading for the positioning of the subject, and for recognizing the changing social, cultural and political formations which affect the production and reception of autobiographical writing (4).

An instance of this 'positioning' is the work of the Sierra Leonean autobiographer Robert Wellesley Cole, whom Griffiths describes as 'unable to write from the position of a universal human being' (1995: 64). As he puts it himself:

In West Africa, you are either white or black. If you are white it does not matter what you are, because in any case you will not be staying in the country for good. You come for a few years, do your job, amass your wealth, win your convert, and go away, leaving the country to the Africans and their mosquitoes, their sunshine, their poverty, and their hopes (Cole 1960: 13).

In my case in Sierra Leone, I came for a few weeks to do my job and shoot my film, before returning to the UK. So I experience Cole's critique here as a persuasive argument for the necessity of my situating myself clearly, as a particular person rather than a 'universal human being', in my film about Sierra Leone and AK.

I am also striving to give up my 'position of unsituated authority' (Behar 1993: 323), knowing as I film and write that all of us 'are incomplete subjects, yet also subjects who can be transformed through how we speak about ourselves ...' (Couldry 2000: 122). I see the contemporary value of being able to speak from an (autobiographical) subject position as being crucially to do with expressing my 'self' in the process of transformation, and I take this situated subjectivity to be the value of autobiography that has been stressed by feminist scholars, despite the acknowledged historical problems of the genre, and the added complexity, in my case, that I speak (write and film) not from the ethnic or gender 'margins', but from the centre (but not, by my own volition, *of* the centre).

Autobiography of course implies authorship - an individual writing/expressing self - and so challenges the much trumpeted orthodoxy of the 'death of the author' which I also want to question - along with Nancy Miller, who argues that

The postmodernist decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him does not [...] necessarily hold for women, and prematurely forecloses the question of agency for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc. (Miller 1988: 106).

Liz Stanley also points out that 'the death of the author', for male academics, is a very convenient death – for them. At the very point when – due to the activities of anti-colonialism, the black movement, the women's movement, the gay movement – 'the author', the authoritative source of all that excludes, is named and has an accusatory finger pointed at him, the author at this point conveniently dies (Stanley 1992: 17)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to deny the equally strong tendency within feminist scholarship to celebrate the death of the author. As Anne McClintock points out, following Said: 'the word *author* itself springs from the same etymological roots as *authority* [original emphases] and is attended by potent notions of engendering, mastery and property. The entry into autobiography, particularly, is seen as the entry into the political authority of self-representation' (1995: 300-301).

I want to suggest that this death is as potentially convenient for white, as well as male, authors. In four pages of explicitly autobiographical reflection early on in *White*, Richard Dyer discusses his personal involvement as a gay white man in his topic of the representation of white people in white, western culture: he concludes that identity politics has had the effect of forcing 'white people in these movements back on to our racial particularity, thus making possible white reflections on whiteness' (1997: 8). This was an important move because, as Ruth Frankenburg points out,

one effect of the colonial discourse is the production of an unmarked, apparently autonomous white/Western self, in contrast with the marked Other [original capitalisation] racial and cultural categories with which the racially and culturally dominant category is constructed (2002: 17).

To counter this construction, she goes on to suggest that 'Whiteness needs to be delimited and "localized"' (231), which is what I have tried to do by putting my 'marked' autobiographical self at the heart of this project. So I'm arguing that keeping my (white, male) self alive as an author is, for my purposes here, an appropriate strategy. Sidonie Smith wishes for

someone to offer an exploration of the relationship of men to autobiography that would re-read the male tradition with attention to the repression of women and the ideology of individualism (1987: 43).

Whilst I'm unsure of how much this project satisfies her demand, I hope that it does begin to 'critique the basis on which male [*and, I would add, white and western*] autobiographical authority asserts itself' (43), by constantly, explicitly and self-critically positioning myself in my various identities: a white, male, 'British' documentary filmmaker. As Stuart Hall said at the 1990 conference referred to above: 'Autobiography is usually thought of as seizing the authority of authenticity. But in order not to be authoritative, I've got to speak autobiographically' (1992: 277). Speaking from my-self, but giving up claims to universality, certitude or final coherence for that self, I can here in this writing – and previously in the *Whited Sepulchre* film – feel sufficient agency

to say something, something ... just now. It is not forever, not universally true. It is not underpinned by any infinite guarantees. But just now, this is what I mean: this is who I am.. (Hall 1987: 45)

But how to begin to express and represent 'who I am'? My challenge now is to find a form of autobiographical writing (as I needed before, with *A Whited Sepulchre*, to attempt a form of autobiographical filmmaking) that subverts the individual, confessional 'monarch-of-all-I-survey scene'. Morwenna Griffiths suggests the term 'critical autobiography' for a form which distinguishes it from the

current cultural norms that 'autobiography' should be a personal, confessional, individualistic, a-theoretical and non-political linear narrative of a life. 'Critical autobiography', in contrast, makes use of individual experience, theory and a process of reflection and re-thinking of individual experience, which includes attention to politically situated perspectives (1995: 70).

I am uncomfortable with Griffiths' rejection of 'confessional, individualistic' narratives, as I can't see how to re-think individual experience without recourse to them. Elspeth Probyn suggests that the rejection of the confessional may derive from a reading of Foucault:

In academic writing, the coalescing around the personal, compounded by shame's intimacy, renders telling tales highly problematic. Relating one's lived experience is taken as "confessional" or as a proclamation of some truth. To those trained in Foucault's critique of the truth-inducing techniques of modernity, to speak of what one feels can be deeply problematic (Probyn 2005: 40).

Although Probyn adds here '[t]his is an oversimplification of Foucault's theory of power', his famous characterisation of confession as coercion remains an argument to be reckoned with:

The obligation to confess is now so relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the

effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface (Foucault 1979: 60).

His argument is based on the (very Catholic or Freudian analytical) imagined presence of an authoritative other in the confessional act, which is therefore seen as

a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile (61-62).

There is nothing intrinsic that I can detect in the activities of autobiographical writing or filmmaking (however 'confessional') that necessarily summons the presence of this 'authority'. Indeed Jon Dovey feels the need, in his discussion of confessional television genres, to

challenge the blanket application of a Foucauldian analysis, which feels to me too neat, too totalising, and too closed a model to account for the wide variety of ways in which the self is produced in contemporary TV. [...] it is possible to argue that there are [...] forms of self-speaking that slip the net of the confessional and become politically challenging, empowering statements not just for the individual speakers but for the social body (Dovey 2000: 106-7).

I agree, and would argue that these critical, challenging and empowering capacities are increased the more that the confessing subject has control over the means of representing their own 'confession' – as in many forms of autobiographical documentary and video-diary making. For example, with current camcorder technology it is possible to record yourself entirely on your own, and to be the only witness to your 'confessions', by viewing yourself as you film in the LCD viewfinder. This capacity for self-scrutiny is then further elaborated in the later processes of self-editing, as Michael Renov has observed:

According to the Freudian orthodoxy [...] 'acting out' first-person confession demands its analytical Other (the analyst-confessor). Could it be, however, that, in the secondary stages of revision we call editing, the videomaker/confessant has the potential, in working through the material, to produce, if only implicitly, something like an analysis, to move from acting out to remembering, from the unconscious to the preconscious or even to consciousness? (Renov 2004: 201)

I want to argue then, that through the processes of self-shooting and editing, the confessant in autobiographical filmmaking has the potential to embody her/his own authoritative other.

## 2c) Autobiographical documentary

'There is no real cinematic equivalent for autobiography...' – Elizabeth Bruss suggested in 1980 (296). Her view was that

in autobiography, the logically distinct roles of author, narrator and protagonist are conjoined, with the same individual occupying a position both in the context, the associated 'scene of writing', and within the text itself' (300).

This lack of 'conjoinment' is particularly evident in documentary films in which the autobiographer appears in front of the camera, at that point probably delegating some of the functions of authorship (framing or camera position for instance) to the camera operator. As Bruss describes it, when the autobiographical filmmaker 'passes into view' we experience 'a flash of vertigo, an eerie instant in which 'no-one is in charge' and we sense that a rootless, inhuman power of vision is wandering the world (309)'. Because filmmaking involves, Bruss says, 'a disparate group of distinct roles and separate stages of production', this undermines the 'unquestionable integrity of the speaking subject' (304) which she holds to be an essential component of autobiographical authorship.

There are two (slightly contradictory) ways in which I'm interested in challenging her assertion here. First, whilst her characterisation of filmmaking as necessarily involving a wide range of distinct authorial agents is true for the more mainstream and industrial forms of filmmaking, it has never held for the more avant-garde practices, and has also been increasingly undermined, across all forms, by recent developments in video and digital technology (in particular camcorders and desk-top editing), which allow for individual authorship in hitherto impossible ways.

Secondly, her requirement that the autobiographical speaking subject has an 'unquestionable integrity' (which is undermined by the range of authorial agents often involved in filmmaking), would seem an impossible and undesirable goal to

many people, given that we are now so aware of the inevitably fragmented and relational nature of the self. Indeed this awareness may indicate that film is a particularly useful medium for contemporary (critical) autobiography: 'film may enable autobiographers to represent subjectivity not as singular and solipsistic but as multiple and as revealed in relationship' (Egan 1994: 593). So the multiple perspectives (of cameraperson, editor and subject/protagonist for instance) that many filmmaking practices entail may make film/video appropriate media for the representation of contemporary non-unified selves. Certainly this is what Catherine Russell believes when she describes how the

three "voices" - speaker [*in voice-over*], seer and seen - are what generate the richness and diversity of autobiographical filmmaking. In addition to the discursive possibility of these three voices is another form of identity, which is that of the avant-garde filmmaker as collagist and editor (1999: 277).

Bruss thinks that autobiographical films have 'a tendency [...] to fall into two opposing groups – those that stress the person filmed and those that stress the person filming – replicating the split between the 'all perceived' and the 'all perceiving' (309). But perhaps the tensions between these two opposites (or between the four 'voices' Russell identifies) are productive, at least for those of us interested in critical autobiographical filmmaking<sup>12</sup>. I would argue anyway that most autobiographical documentaries exist somewhere in the middle ground between these two groups, and so tend to subvert both the omniscient surveillance of the 'other' implicit in her phrase the 'all perceived', and the sovereign subjectivity conveyed by the phrase 'all perceiving'. Bruss herself acknowledges the possibilities for self-fragmentation film offers when she complains that

The unity of subjectivity and subject matter – the implied identity of author, narrator and protagonist on which classical autobiography depends –

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<sup>12</sup> A similarly diverse number of voices were involved in the authorship of *A Whited Sepulchre*: me as cameraman, me as video diarist speaking to camera, me as interviewer/protagonist, me as voice-over artist (for myself and for AK), and me as editor (in collaboration with Jerry Rothwell).

seems to be shattered by film; the autobiographical self de-composes, schisms, into almost mutually exclusive elements of the person filmed (entirely visible, recorded and projected) and the person filming (entirely hidden, behind the camera eye) (297).

Of course, the apparently exclusive categories of 'person filmed' and 'person filming' have been brought together (potentially, and, in the video diary form, actually) by recently available camcorder technologies. But the practice of autobiographical film goes back further than this recent history. As P. Adams Sitney's writing makes clear (1978: 199-246), filmmakers such as Jerome Hill, Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas were working autobiographically well before Bruss declared that autobiography had no cinematic equivalent. Indeed, the possibility of autobiographical expression in film, where 'roles of author, narrator and protagonist are conjoined' (Bruss 1980: 300), was inherent in Alexandre Astruc's concept of 'La Caméra-Stylo', elaborated in an essay written in 1948 (1968), which overtly stresses the similarities between cinematic and literary authorship. Joram Ten Brink comments that the early, personal documentaries made by Alain Resnais and Chris Marker<sup>13</sup> followed 'the 'Caméra-Stylo' assertion that cinema is a tool of subjective expression' (2007: 239). He goes on to discuss how the reflexivity in Rouch's *Chronique d'un été* was a 'direct consequence of the "Caméra-Stylo"', and how for Rouch and Morin (the authors of the film) 'Their "self", either visible or obscured, is often a reference point, and inseparable from the "text" of the film' (241). Laura Rascaroli describes how, in the same period in Italy, the filmmaker and theorist of Italian Neo-realism, Cesare Zavattini, developed 'radical ideas on the need and opportunity to use the camera for a personal, autobiographical, first-person cinema' (2009: 111).

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<sup>13</sup> Marker has said more recently: 'The process of making films in communion with oneself, the way a painter works or a writer, need not now be solely experimental. Contrary to what people say, using the first-person in films tends to be a sign of humility: "all I have to offer is myself"' (Darke 2003).

The challenges of autobiographical filmmaking outlined by Bruss were also taken up on the other side of the Atlantic. The schisms and de-compositions predicted by her were consciously played with by US independent Jon Jost in his 1974 autobiographical film *Speaking Directly*. He talks often directly to camera (as the title declares) in the film, and at one point comments specifically on the distance between being the person filmed and the person filming:

Most lenses focus good from about a foot and a half away, to infinity – which isn't quite close enough to get a good picture of yourself ... or myself.

Jost's film also gives his partner, and some of his friends, the opportunity to comment on his character – often in less than flattering terms – so the 'point of view' of the film is certainly not unproblematically univocal.

Michael Renov's writing has traced the development of the visible self and the autobiographical voice in documentary over the last two decades. He cites the work of Mekas, Lynn Hershmann and Ilene Segalove in the 1980s as inaugurating a 'new autobiography in film and video' (2004: 104-119), part of:

the recent outpouring of work by independent film and video artists who evidence an attachment both to the documentary *and* [original emphasis] to the complex representation of their own subjectivity (109).

Jim Lane also acknowledges this autobiographical history within the avant-garde in his book *The Autobiographical Documentary in America* (2002), which concentrates, however, not on the avant-garde, but on work by filmmakers (like Ross McElwee and Ed Pincus) who emerged from the Direct Cinema movement. The hand-held, observational style of Direct Cinema, with its long takes and suspicion of conventional editing, was in many ways suited to autobiography, as MacDougall suggests in a comment on the embodied nature of observational camerawork:

In place of a camera that resembled an omniscient, floating eye which could at any moment be anywhere in a room (with a close-up, an over-the-

shoulder shot, a reverse angle) there was to be a camera clearly tied to the person of an individual filmmaker (MacDougall 1998: 86).

A camera clearly tied to a person offers a kind of subjective 'claim on the real', which also connects these filmmakers to their roots in Direct Cinema. They shared a belief in actuality, in the 'referential' function of film, which distinguished them from the avant-garde:

Their use of sound and image functioned on a register far removed from the avant-garde. The tendency of this movement was (and is) to view documentary as a fundamentally referential form, marking a significant difference from the autobiographical avant-garde (Lane 2002: 14-15).

At the same time Lane points out how

By repositioning the filmmaker at the foreground of the film, the new autobiographical documentary disrupted the detached, objective ideal of direct cinema, which excluded the presence of the filmmaker and the cinematic apparatus (12).

On this side of the Atlantic this move from observational to autobiographical documentary has been mirrored most clearly in the career of Nick Broomfield, initially trained in observational documentary at the National Film School. Despite the 'autobiographical' presence Broomfield has cultivated in his more recent films, he is strictly speaking not an autobiographical documentary maker, but, as Stella Bruzzi convincingly demonstrates, someone who uses his 'alter ego of the friendly man with a boom [*microphone*]' (2006: 109) as a particular filmmaking strategy: so 'Nick Broomfield ≠ "Nick Broomfield"' (208). He made this distinction very clear himself when he made a series of television advertisements - starring "Nick Broomfield" - in 1999 for Volkswagen. He appears - almost parodying his persona - as the familiar friendly, but slightly bumbling man with the boom and headphones, testing out the cars' safety features.

So "Nick Broomfield" is a partly fictionalised character that Broomfield mobilises for narrative purposes in his films. This is perhaps made most clear when the



Fig. 4: "Nick Broomfield"

device breaks down (and the films become more 'authentically autobiographical'), as in the sequence in which an obviously impassioned 'Broomfield'/Broomfield storms the ACLU stage to confront Courtney Love in *Kurt and Courtney* (1998), or in the final interview sequence with Aileen Wournos in *Aileen: The Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003), just before her execution. In her discussion of this sequence Bruzzi describes this film as among his 'least showy' and 'most sincere' works since he began involving himself as author on screen (217)<sup>14</sup>.

For Bruzzi, Broomfield is a prime example of a filmmaker (along with others like Molly Dineen and Michael Moore) who shows how 'documentaries are performative acts whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming' (10 & 207-217). His work also developed out of the Direct Cinema tradition whose

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<sup>14</sup> The relationship between the autobiographical filmmaker's 'performance' and their 'authenticity' is a complex issue in all autobiographical filmmaking – not just in Broomfield's version. I return to it in the Conclusion, part 4.

original ambition was to convey on film the truth of 'being there', of unmediated presence. What became clear to Broomfield and many others, was that the truth (and the drama) of 'being there' inevitably involved their own (the filmmaker's) presence, and to deny it was both dishonest, and missed much of the actual drama of the documentary-making process. As Jon Dovey puts it:

More than any other film-maker Broomfield's work represents the documentary tradition confronting and taking on the epistemological challenges of contemporary culture and incorporating them into a structure which relies crucially on the foregrounding of subjectivity in order to be able to make sense (2000: 33).

However, despite this foregrounded subjectivity, Broomfield and other filmmakers like Michael Moore who work in the same vein, remain quite hidden. We 'know nothing of their private selves – only their narrative personae' (Dovey 2000: 40).

There is however a growing body of documentary film work by male film-makers that pushes the first person mode much further towards the confessional. [...] Ross McElwee is widely regarded as one of the leading film-makers in this territory (ibid: 40-41).

McElwee, like Broomfield, started working within the Direct Cinema tradition, before becoming more directly autobiographical: 'I began making autobiographical films because I felt that I just didn't have whatever it took to maintain that artifice of being the invisible person from behind the camera'<sup>15</sup>. His first film in this mode – *Sherman's March* (1986) - dramatises the transition. It begins - ostensibly - as an historical film about General Sherman's march to the sea in 1864, but is quickly side-tracked into an exploration of McElwee's tortuous love life. McElwee has pursued this technique in his films in the twenty years since *Sherman's March* – always positioning himself autobiographically and personally within the social themes and issues which his films also explore. So *The Six O'Clock News* (1996) is about his feelings as a first time parent concerned for his new baby, counterpointed with a nervous critique of

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Doug Block, The Ross McElwee Collection DVD, First Run Features 2006

sensationalist news coverage of murders and natural disasters (as he put it: 'seeing the world through the lens of fatherhood for the first time'<sup>16</sup>), and the more recent *Bright Leaves* (2003) tells the story of his family's involvement in the tobacco trade interspersed with more personal reflections ('a meditation on legacy and heritage [...] and what legacy means'<sup>17</sup>). He approaches the social world and conventional documentary themes by filming, and filtering them through, his personal, autobiographical experience, as he put it himself in an interview:

[...] melding the two – the objective data of the world with a very subjective, very interior consciousness, as expressed through voice-over and on-camera appearances – (Lucia 1994: 32)

- which serves as an accurate summary of many of my techniques in *A Whited Sepulchre*.

As we have seen, the work of McElwee and Broomfield, in their self-referential use of themselves on screen (their refusal to be 'the invisible person from behind the camera'), represents a radical shift from the conventions of Direct Cinema. Michael Renov has pointed out how:

During the direct cinema period self-reference was shunned. But far from a sign of self-effacement, this was the symptomatic silence of the empowered who sought no forum for self-justification or display. And why should they need one? These white male professionals had assumed the mantle of filmic representation with the ease and self-assurance of a birthright. (2004: 94)

McElwee's and Broomfield's breaking the 'silence of the empowered' can therefore be seen as an abandonment on their part of the authority of anonymity, as well as a declaration of 'honesty'. However, the new 'white male professionals' who embrace self-reference - Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock as well as Broomfield and McElwee - have themselves been critiqued for the way they use

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

a clearly signed and pronounced lack of self-assurance in their films. All four of them in different ways mobilise (and often revel in) what Jon Dovey has characterised as the 'Klutz persona' – whose pratfalls on screen mask their authorial mastery and skills – 'a failure who makes mistakes and denies any mastery of the communicative process' (2000: 27).

In his essay 'Jargons of Authenticity' (1993) Paul Arthur posited what he calls a 'documentary "aesthetics of failure"' to explore the 'klutz' phenomenon. The overall thesis of his essay is that - from the 1930s through the Direct Cinema period to now - mainstream documentary has sought to guarantee its authenticity by repudiating

the methods of earlier periods from the same perspective of realist epistemology ... [*which he defines as*] the absolute desire to discover a truth untainted by institutional forms of rhetoric ...

Arthur goes on to assert that

Each new contender (in the search for untainted truth) will generate recognizable, perhaps even self-conscious, figures, through which to signify the spontaneous, the anti-conventional, the refusal of mediating process (1993: 109).

In the current period (since the 1990s) that figure is the klutz – the only kind of filmmaker whose truth claims, by virtue of his<sup>18</sup> appearance on screen, we will be inclined to believe in our sceptical, post-modern times. Nowadays, as Arthur goes on to say,

it is required that filmmakers peel away the off-screen cloak of anonymity and, emerging into the light, make light of their power and dominion [...] But a willingness to actually take apart and examine the conventions by which authority is inscribed - as opposed to making sport of them - is largely absent (1993: 128).

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<sup>18</sup> These filmmakers seem to be invariably male, and the films are consequently highly 'gender inflected' (Dovey 2000: 27). Other examples include Louis Theroux and Jon Ronson, although they don't 'self-shoot' but work as journalists with crews.

So, in less theoretical language the klutz is a 'con', a confidence trick, the latest attempt to shore up documentary filmmakers' authority and our realist truth claims. It is also a technique borrowed from written autobiography, in which 'to prevent the reader being repelled by the blatant egotism of the autobiographer's self display, the self may also be represented as inadequate, ashamed and in some respects a failure' (Dalziell 1999: 6). However, when Broomfield messes up his interview with Terre Blanche in *The Leader, His Driver and The Driver's Wife* (1991) or Michael Moore fails to track down Roger in *Roger and Me* (1989), their displays of being out of control merely reassert their actual control over their material – giving an impression of its authenticity and therefore confirming its (and their) authority. 'Out of controlness' becomes a rhetorical device that signifies authenticity, as well as modesty:

[...] it is exactly the open admission of, indeed a central obsession with, inadequacy emblazoned by formal disjunction and underwritten by dramatic displays of nontotalized knowledge – patriarchal mastery in disarray – which performs the labour of signifying authenticity and documentary truth (Arthur 1993: 132).

The master may be in disarray, but he is still master. Arthur's unhappiness about these filmmakers' lack of a 'willingness to actually take apart and examine the conventions by which authority is inscribed' contains an implicit plea for filmmakers to adopt techniques that are more genuinely self-reflexive, that problematise rather than tacitly reproduce documentary authenticity. Perhaps the most visible and articulate proponent of forms of reflexivity that undermine what she calls 'the Master's colonialist mistakes' (1992: 124) is the filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha. For her, documentary films that are either overtly personally authored (like 'klutz' films), or completely avoid authorial self-reference in the interests of objectivity, are both equally suspect:

What is presented as evidence remains evidence, whether the observing eye qualifies itself as being subjective or objective. At the core of such a rationale dwells, untouched, the Cartesian division between subject and

object which perpetuates a dualistic inside-versus-outside, mind-against-matter view of the world. The emphasis is again laid on the power of film to capture reality 'out there' for us 'in here'. The moment of appropriation and of consumption is either simply ignored or carefully rendered invisible according to the rules of good and bad documentary. (Minh-Ha 1991: 35)

She is therefore critical of those filmmakers who 'appear in person in the film so as to guarantee the authenticity of the observation' (191: 55), or who 'agree to the necessity of self-reflectivity and reflexivity in filmmaking' but 'think that it suffices to show oneself at work on the screen, or to point to one's role once in a while in the film' (1991: 77). She is not against 'bringing the self into play', but argues for a 'radically plural' form of reflexivity:

What is set in motion in its praxis are the self generating links between different forms of reflexivity. Thus, a subject who points to him/her/itself as subject-in-process, a work that displays its own formal properties or its own constitution at work, is bound to upset one's sense of identity – the familiar distinction between the Same and the Other, since the latter is no longer kept in a recognizable relation of dependence, derivation or appropriation. (Minh-Ha 1991: 48)

On these terms she appreciates the uses of autobiography – as a way for marginalised people 'to find a voice and to enter the arena of visibility' (Minh-Ha 1991: 191):

Its diverse strategies can favor the emergence of new forms of subjectivity: the subjectivity of a non-I, plural I, which is different from the subjectivity of the sovereign I (subjectivism) or the non-subjectivity of the all-knowing I (objectivism). Such a subjectivity defies the normality of all binary oppositions including those between sameness and otherness, individual and societal, elite and mass, high culture and popular culture. (Minh-Ha 1991: 192)

In my view (perhaps as someone overly schooled in the 'rules of good and bad documentary') Minh-Ha's formulations sometimes read as frustratingly abstract, and some of her films, while frequently beautiful on the surface, remain (as

frustratingly) impenetrable (to me) at the level of their meaning<sup>19</sup>. Jon Dovey alludes to the same problem when he suggests that

It is hard to understand how the film texts implied by a critique like Trinh's could function as anything other than culturally marginal experiments in which an address to the 'constitution of meaning' produces 'meaninglessness' (2000: 52).

I'm inclined to believe that this potential 'meaninglessness' is caused by Trinh's apparent disregard for what (to me) is a basic fact of filmmaking: the possession of a camera by the filmmaker inevitably renders what/who is in front of his/her lens as 'other' – an inescapable 'binary opposition' which of necessity has to reproduce 'the Cartesian division between subject and object' (Minh-Ha 1991: 35). I think that the reflexive potential of autobiographical filmmaking derives precisely from this 'Cartesian division', and lies in the fact that the main 'other' in front of the lens is usually none other than the filmmaker her/himself, both seer and seen, making this opposition/division a primary and often explicit theme of these films.

This is perhaps most obviously exemplified in the work of Ross McElwee, in which his own presence as camera-person/director is a constant theme of his films. For instance in *Time Indefinite* (1993) - which centres on his relationship with his family, particularly his complex feelings about his father, at a time when he himself is contemplating marriage - his camera runs out of battery power just as he's announced his engagement to his girlfriend Marilyn, in a large group of relatives that have gathered for a family birthday. McElwee cuts to some camcorder footage shot by one of his relatives, and suggests in voice-over that his father was giving out a 'force field that plays havoc with my equipment'. There is also the sequence from *Six O'Clock News* (1996) that comes around half an hour into the film. The basic theme - as I've already mentioned, McElwee's

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<sup>19</sup> Or even at the level of being able to (literally) see them. Trinh tells an amusing story about her 'dislike of visible chatter. Visibility is not our main concern and our cinematographer (Kathleen Beeler) has often had to remind us of the factor of legibility in the process of image-making'. (Minh-Ha interviewed in McLaughlin & Pearce 2007: 116)

increasing feelings of vulnerability as a new father in the face of the daily horrors and disasters he witnesses on the 6 o'clock news - has already been established. In this sequence he allows himself to become the subject of a local news programme, allowing them to film him as a curiosity: the strange man who films his own life. By intercutting his own footage of the crew's visit to his flat with the item that ends up on the 6 o'clock news, McElwee reflexively portrays an amusing struggle between conflicting cinematic ethics, styles and objectives. He makes us aware of his own - and other - filmmaking practices within the piece by filming the three takes by the news crew as they are coming through the door, making their apparently 'spontaneous' introductions. Once they are installed in his kitchen, he competes (unsuccessfully) for the best camera position with the news cameraman, with McElwee ending up disadvantaged by having to shoot into the light from his kitchen window. His customary ironic voice-over (added at the editing stage) is present throughout the sequence, confessing his personal difficulty in coming up with 'soundbites' for the reporter, and musing, for instance, on the nature of 'real' (or Hollywood) films versus his own practice of making documentaries.

Of course these examples are highly reflexive (in the sense that the filmmaking techniques draw attention to their own construction) – especially, of course, when McElwee is being filmed himself. Furthermore, despite the reflexive shortcomings of the autobiographical mode in Minh-Ha's critique, it is my contention that reflexivity forms an important element in most contemporary approaches to first-person filmmaking. I'm interested here in analysing some of these films to focus on the material, reflexive relationship of the filmmaker/autobiographer to the camera, the filmmaking process and to the other subjects of the films, to address more closely the issue of the opposition/division between seer and seen explored above. This also, of course, returns us to Bruss's concern with 'the implied identity of author, narrator and protagonist on which classical autobiography depends', and will enable us to see how this identity is manifested, and played with, particularly in relation to the other (non-authorial) subjects of the films. In a

way that written autobiography can easily avoid, autobiographical filmmaking necessarily confronts the author/narrator, both with him/herself and with her/his 'others' (friends, family and any other characters in the films). My argument is that these confrontations invariably lead to a reflexive quality manifested in the films.

Confrontations along these lines are at the heart of *The Alcohol Years* (2000), Carol Morley's film in which she retraced a missing period of her life when she had drunk herself into oblivion, by interviewing people she knew at the time. She doesn't appear in the film, but her interviewees talk directly to her (and us in the audience), looking into the lens of her camera, producing a curious sensation of the collapse into one another of the identities of author, protagonist *and* audience. This autobiographical use of the camera has profound consequences for the issue of 'othering'. Morley's previous alcoholic self is ruthlessly scrutinised (some of her interviewees being hurt by, and/or critical of, how she treated them in her lost years), but we in the audience are made to experience the scrutiny almost as though it were us being judged, because the interviewees speak into the lens. The boundaries between subject and object, the authorial self and her 'others', are blurred and complicated.

This complication is a recurrent trope of many recent autobiographical documentaries. The filmmaker is always 'visible' in relationship to the people s/he is filming, sometimes actually because s/he appears alongside them, sometimes metaphorically because his/her presence is registered from behind the camera (in similar ways as Morley's was above). So too the issue of how the (autobiographical) filmmaker relates to, and is treating his/her subjects is also almost always visible. *Family* (2001) is a film by two young Danes, Sami Saif and Phie Ambo-Nielsen, in which Phie (operating the camera) observes Sami as he struggles to reconcile with his family back in Yemen where he comes from. Phie and Sami were in a relationship at the time of filming – and their intimacy becomes the main device of the film as Phie gently confronts Sami, persuading

him to go deeper into his familial relationships – first in a search for his father, then in his developing relationship with his new found brother in Yemen.

Because she is not only a cinematographer and filmmaker but also a girlfriend, Phie is unable to merely observe and register what goes on [...] from her position behind the camera (Jerslev 2005: 94)

There is a key scene which demonstrates this complex relationship well, in which Sami's brother weeps about their other brother's suicide with Sami, then turns to the camera and says 'Thankyou Phie' and she thanks him back, mitigating the voyeurism which is often a part of the more 'objective' documentary depiction of strong emotion. Jerslev later describes this technique as 'an *unpretentious immanent reflexivity* [original emphasis] that may serve the projection of a sense of immediacy and proximity and thus involve the viewer emotionally' (103).

Dennis O'Rourke's documentary *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991) also makes use of the way in which the autobiographical filmmaker relates to her/his subject, but in a more troubling way. Linda Williams has described this as a 'film about a Thai prostitute hired by the filmmaker to be his lover and the subject of his film' (1999: 176) – a strategy by which, she points out, he 'makes himself vulnerable to feminist wrath' (176). However she goes on to 'argue that that very vulnerability is also what makes this film so challenging to conventional documentary ethics' (176-7). A large part of this vulnerability derives from the way his autobiographical camera exposes his relationship with Aoi (the prostitute):

Her speech to the camera (and thus to O'Rourke, who operates both camera and sound throughout the film) alternates between extremely factual accounts of the economics of her life [...], and extremely emotional accounts of her hatred of men [...]. She clearly condemns the patriarchal system that holds her in such thrall, and she astutely includes her relationship with O'Rourke as part of that system (Williams 1999: 180-81)

At the same time Williams applauds 'O'Rourke's effort to be ethical within an unequal situation – which is, after all, the situation that most men and women

inhabit in the real world' (185). As an aside, in making *A Whited Sepulchre*, I encountered some of what she calls the 'sorts of messy relativities' (1999: 188) that O'Rourke deals with in *The Good Woman of Bangkok*. Although following in my great-grandfather's footsteps was perhaps a less ethically complex intervention than O'Rourke's with Aoi, it nevertheless grapples with some similar relations of colonial filmmaking power; both films are part of those 'new forms of documentary practice that seem to have abandoned the traditional respect for objectivity and distance [...] in contexts fraught with sexual, racial and postcolonial dynamics of power' (Williams 1999: 178).

In a more domestic register, Sandrine Bonnaire – the well-known French actor – filmed her autistic sister over many years as her disability worsened, and in *Elle s'appelle Sabine* she edits this footage together into a moving and intimate account of Sabine's life and their relationship. Sabine's disability sometimes manifested itself as an obsessive need for reassurance that Sandrine is not about to abandon her, or is returning the next day to see her, so that often she's repeatedly addressing these kinds of questions directly to the camera: 'When are you going?' 'Are you coming back tomorrow?': and Sandrine is answering them, often with mounting exasperation, from behind the camera, which puts us, in the audience, into a virtual simulation of their relationship, not dissimilar to O'Rourke's with Aoi in *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, or Morley's with her friends in *Alcohol Years*. This works as well with scenes of joyful intimacy as with conflict. At one point towards the end of the film Sandrine shows her sister home-movie footage of a trip to the US they made when Sabine was younger and less disable. Sabine bursts into tears when she sees her younger self, telling the camera/Sandrine that they are 'tears of joy'.

In *I for India* (2005) Sandhya Suri also builds on the unique emotional access she has to her subjects, but in a very different way, as she tells the story of her parents' immigration to England from India, largely through a reworking of the family home-movie archive. Her father was a keen amateur filmmaker, and he

exchanged 8mm films, video and audio cassettes with relatives back in India. The filmmaker (who appears as her younger self in much of this material, of course) arranges these elements, along with some contemporary interviews and observational sequences of her family members, into a moving impression of the emotional cost of immigration and diasporic living. *I for India* is a self-conscious exploration of the family memory as represented (often partially or unreliably) in the 'home-movie' footage. In a sense, as a portrait of a family by an insider, it is more what Michael Renov calls 'domestic ethnography' than autobiography, but Renov comments that 'domestic ethnography entails but exceeds autobiography':

In all instances of domestic ethnography, the familial other helps to flesh out the very contours of the enunciating self, offering itself as a precursor, alter ego, double, instigator, spiritual guide or perpetrator of trauma (228).

As Renov implies, the 'familial' or intimate 'other' in these films is frequently in conflict with the filmmaker. In Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* (1996) – a portrait of his father – this conflict becomes the main narrative device of the film, which is structured around an abrasive interview by Berliner of his father, who is constantly on the verge of walking out because he considers his life 'nobody's business' but his own. In *Tell Them Who You Are* (2006) Mark Wexler also struggles to portray (and to reconcile himself with) his own father, the cinematographer and left-wing radical filmmaker Haskell Wexler<sup>20</sup>. Mark is clearly politically much more conservative: his best-known documentary up to the point he made *Tell Them Who You Are* was a celebratory film about Air Force One, the US Presidential airplane. However the differences between father and son are revealed as more than political, and are embedded into the structure of this film they are making together (often competitively filming each other). This Oedipal struggle is made clear in the poster for the film (Fig. 5) in

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<sup>20</sup> Haskell Wexler is well known for directing *Medium Cool* (1969) a 'docu-drama' about the 1968 Chicago Democratic convention.

which Mark appears as a little boy whose tiny video camera seems no match for his father's 35mm machine: size is everything in this shoot-out:

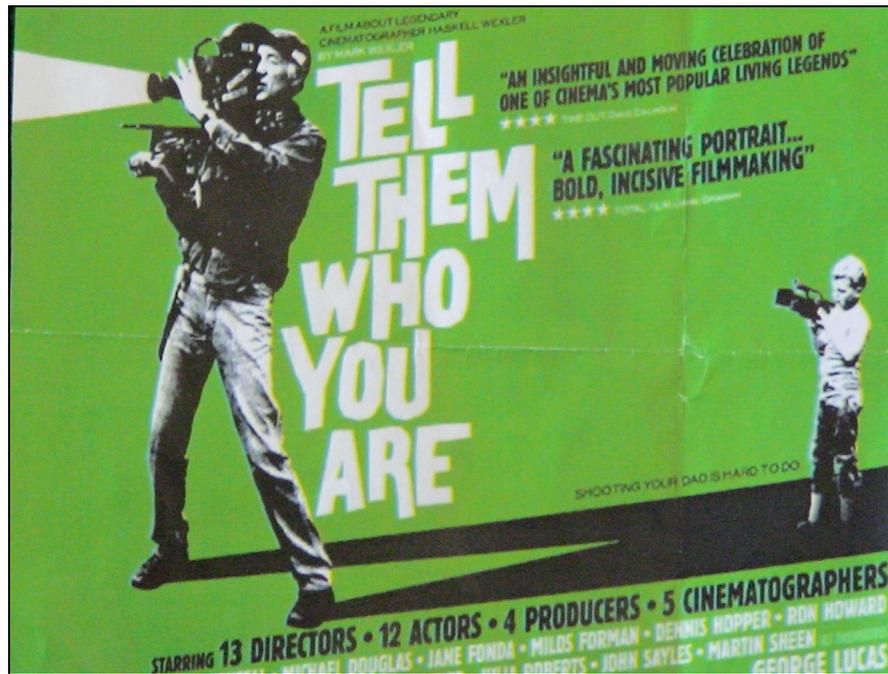


Fig. 5

Even so, *Tell Them Who You Are* ends with a touching reconciliation sequence in which Mark, shooting his father swimming in a pool, gives up the struggle and allows his father to direct the shot as he swims smiling towards the camera. The emotional resolution in the film is cleverly effected via a negotiation about how the scene is to be photographed – a sequence enabled by the relationships made possible in self-shot autobiographical documentary: their reconciliation is reflexively expressed.

Sometimes the ethics of these encounters with 'familial others' through the camera are less clear-cut. In *Tarnation* (2004) Jonathan Caoutte makes a portrait of himself alongside a very emotional account of his relationship with his mother, who spent all of his life with her going in and out of Mental Health institutions. The film includes a couple of long sequences where he films his interactions with her when she is clearly in states of obvious distress and extreme confusion – which he does with himself too in a tearful piece to camera towards the end of

the film. Nevertheless he has been critiqued<sup>21</sup> for transgressing the boundaries of the 'home movie' - making public what was intended to be private and domestic, and could equally be called to account for exploiting his mother when she was clearly completely unable to give lucid consent to the filming process. However, the quality and impact of these sequences - the raw, touching openness and vulnerability of Caoutte's mother - are clearly the result of her relationship to her son and his autobiographical, observational camera.

The issue of obtaining the consent or even collaboration of the films' other subjects for the autobiographical filmmaker is complex – and often visible in the film as we saw with Berliner and Wexler above. It is a noticeable feature of the films of Ross McElwee how often his friends and partner ask him to stop shooting and turn off his camera. The voyeuristic power over their subjects that all documentary filmmakers possess is rendered much more obvious in these films by the often inevitable reflexivity of the shooting situation. In *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman* (2006) – a 6 x 1 hour series Jennifer Fox made for television, she explores a way of deconstructing this voyeuristic power. She had two main aims in making the series: the first was to break through her feeling when she started filming that she was in a crisis of 'modern female identity' ('I cannot see my life')<sup>22</sup>, and the second was to explore these feelings with women family members and women friends to find out 'how women speak when men aren't around', and whether the feeling of sharing she experienced with her friends would be there in different parts of the world. She shot 1600 hours of material over five years about her own and her international group of women friends' attitudes to sex and relationships, by doing self-filmed pieces to camera (on

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<sup>21</sup> For instance by Liz Czach (2005).

<sup>22</sup> These statements and those that follow were all made by Fox at a 'Masterclass' with the filmmaker I attended at the ICA, London, February 2008.



Fig. 6: Jennifer Fox does a piece-to-camera in *Flying*, after discovering that she is pregnant

every day she filmed) as well as by using a technique she calls ‘passing the camera’. In conversations with individuals and groups of friends and women she had just met, she would (with some minimal instruction) pass the camera to someone else if she had something to add to the conversation. In these ways some of her voyeuristic power was diminished and she was able to make herself appear (as a subject of the filmmaking process) as equally open and vulnerable as the other women she was filming (despite her being in editorial control).



Fig. 7: Jennifer Fox (second from right) with some of her subjects/co-authors in the series

I think it is clear from all of the examples that the particular circumstances of autobiographical filmmaking, the confrontations it engenders between the filmmakers' selves and the others that appear in their films, continually raise key questions about the (power relationship) between filmmaker and subject in an always overt and often reflexive fashion.

## 2d) First person video

First of all, the low grade video image has become *the* [original emphasis] privileged form of TV 'truth-telling', signifying authenticity and an indexical reproduction of the real world; indexical in the sense of presuming a direct and transparent correspondence between what is in front of the camera lens and its taped representation. Secondly, the camcorder text has become the form that most relentlessly insists upon a localised, subjective and embodied account of experience (Dovey 2000: 55).

Clearly Fox's techniques in *Flying* (2006), described in the last chapter, were very dependent on being able to generate footage on low cost, lightweight and easy-to-use video equipment. The advent of the camcorder has enabled a new aesthetic in autobiographical filmmaking, that of the 'video-diary', which has itself become a new 'jargon of authenticity' (Arthur 1993):

Everything about it, the hushed whispering voiceover, the incessant to-camera close-up, the shaking camera movements, the embodied intimacy of the technical process, appears to reproduce experiences of subjectivity. We feel closer to the presence and process of the filmmaker. (Dovey 2000: 57)

Agnes Varda revels in this intimate use of the camcorder in *The Gleaners and I* (2000), celebrating it as one more instance of 'gleaning', in the way it enables her to Hoover up images with ease as she travels, like the gleaners in the wheat fields in Millet's painting 'Les glaneuses', whom she talks about at the beginning of the film. She enthuses on the soundtrack 'these new small cameras, they are digital, fantastic, narcissistic, and even hyper-realistic' and she exploits the potential of her camera



Fig. 8: Frame grab from *The Gleaners & I*

as a tool for self examination, 'gleaning' images of herself as she points it at her hand:



Fig. 9: Frame grabs from *The Gleaners & I*

the film becomes a self-portrait and meditation on ageing and death, counterpointing the social critique of poverty and waste that is the main theme of the film. In a number of sequences she reminds us of the physicality - 'the embodied intimacy' - of her use of the camcorder, for instance as she drives along the motorway filming her own hand again:



Fig. 10: Frame grabs from *The Gleaners & I*



Fig. 10 cont: Frame grabs from *The Gleaners & I*

This playful, home-made aesthetic made possible by the camcorder, is a large part of its appeal for documentary makers. In comparison to film, video is cheap and accessible: for instance, the production of *Tarnation* (Caouette 2003 - described above) was wholly dependent on developments in low-cost video technology in a number of respects. A lot of the footage was originally shot by Caouette in his childhood on various domestic formats, which he then edited together with contemporary diary and impromptu, intimate observational footage, on i-Movie, Apple's domestic editing programme. This first cut, before the film was taken up by distributors and shown at the Cannes Film Festival, cost a total of \$213.72<sup>23</sup>. Other video artists in the US, before Caouette, have exploited the accessible, domestic intimacy of the new video technologies in similar ways – notably Sadie Benning, George Kuchar and Wendy Clarke.

Benning's tapes from the early 1990s<sup>24</sup> (when she was a teenager) made use of an early 'toy' video camera made by Fisher Price, that, in Catherine Russell's words, 'produced such a low definition image that it became known as pixelvision'. Russell goes on to remark:

Because pixelvision is restricted to a level of close-up detail, it is an inherently reflexive medium [...] The "big picture" is always out of reach, as

<sup>23</sup> According to Caouette himself in an interview (Sherwin 2004). He estimated the final costs, after all the post-production processes needed to put it into distribution, were going to be 'just under \$400,000' (ibid).

<sup>24</sup> Her work is distributed by Video Data Bank: [www.vdb.org/smackn.acgi\\$artistdetail?BENNINGS](http://www.vdb.org/smackn.acgi$artistdetail?BENNINGS) (accessed 6/11/09)

the filmmaker is necessarily drawn to the specificity of daily life (1990: 291).

Benning's tapes were often made in the privacy of her bedroom, and explored, amongst other themes, her coming out as a young lesbian. This same quotidian intimacy is a feature of George Kuchar's video diaries<sup>25</sup>, again according to Russell:

He creates the impression that he carries the camera with him everywhere, and that it mediates his relation with the world at large. [...] The camera is explicitly situated as an extension of his 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 (286 & 289).

Russell summarises Benning's and Kuchar's video diaries as representing their bodies in space. The camera as an instrument of vision serves as a means of making themselves visible, a vehicle for the performance of their identities. [...] 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 (294-295).

This kind of subjectivity is, of course, in stark contrast to 'the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene' which Pratt criticises (1992: 205), and acts as a counter to Minh-Ha's 'Master's colonialist mistakes' (1992: 124).

Wendy Clarke's *Love Tapes*<sup>26</sup> project is a very different piece of work in terms of its production process, although it exploits the subjective and intimate possibilities offered by video in a similar way. Since 1978 she has been inviting individuals, in a wide range of venues, to sit in front of a camera connected to a monitor for three minutes on their own, and talk about 'love' to a musical accompaniment of their own choosing. At the end of their recording, the participant/confessant plays the tape back to her/him-self, still on their own, and

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<sup>25</sup> His work is distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix: [ww.eai.org/eai/artistTitles.htm?id=313](http://ww.eai.org/eai/artistTitles.htm?id=313) (accessed 6/11/09)

<sup>26</sup> An early collection of the tapes is distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix (Clarke 1981).

decides whether to erase it or add to Clarke's collection. Over the years she has amassed an enormous number of these pieces, some of which have been collected together and distributed, most of which are still piled up in her house, uncatalogued<sup>27</sup>. Michael Renov describes how they

tap remarkable, and unpredictable, affective wellsprings in troubled youths, guilt-stricken fathers, adoring dog owners, those who have lost or never known love, others whose capacity for love has been revived (2004: 206).

Renov's contention is that '*The Love Tapes* effect a temporary inversion' of the power of television:

Instead of spewing a one-way stream of words and images [...], Clarke's installed monitor shows the subject only herself as she (re)produces herself. [...] At last [...] television stops talking and just listens. Video becomes the eye that sees and the ear that listens, powerfully but without judgement or reprisal (206).

This was certainly my experience when I made one of these tapes, at Wendy Clarke's instigation, at a conference on first person filmmaking in 2005<sup>28</sup>. The power of video as a confessional medium, as a non-judgemental eye and ear, is an issue I will come back to (in chapters 3c and 3d). For the moment I will just agree with US filmmaker Lynn Hershman when she attests to this power as she talks to the camera in her film *Binge*: 'Right now I'm sitting here with no cameraman in the room. I'm totally alone. I would never, ever talk this way if somebody were here' (quoted in Renov 2004: 202).

### **The video diary genre**

Video diary making evolved its own specific generic qualities as it developed through the 1990s. Perhaps the most visible of these - and the one I want to

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<sup>27</sup> Personal communication with Wendy Clarke (2004).

<sup>28</sup> *My Love Tape* is on the DVD – Extras 1

focus on here - is the 'to-camera piece' in which the video diarist turns the camera on her- or himself and records her/his thoughts, very much as we've seen with *The Love Tapes*. This technique provides a close, filmic analogy to the written diary:

The visual form ... borrows from the literary model the tone, the revelation of intimate detail, and its use as a site for recording traumatic or at least serious confessions. The personal mode of address has a visual analogue in the 'to-camera' set up of the video diary...' (Reid, 1999)

Sue Dinsmore characterises this 'set up' as 'providing a space for self-reflection and reconsideration that performs a function very similar to making an entry in a written diary' (46). So the video camera - particularly when directly addressed by the diarist - becomes a recording device not very different to the pen and paper of the private written diary.

Ironically, though, the 'piece to camera' convention also closely resembles the most widely used technique for conveying public authority and objectivity on broadcast TV. The direct, square-on address to the camera almost always connotes impartiality, neutrality, the delivery of the objective facts (the newsreader being its most iconic form). It is only rarely used to evoke the person's individuality or subjectivity. However, in the video diary form, as Jon Dovey notes '... the direct camcorder address has a simplicity that marks it out from other highly mediated TV genres' (128). And '... in the diary format it becomes another way of creating high levels of identification with the filmmaker. Aiming the camera at yourself, using your own body to record your own body, you the diarist, whisper in to the lens' (73).

The first viewer to experience this whispered intimacy is usually the video diarist her/himself, playing back what they have recorded before showing it to anyone else. The camcorder is a 'mirror machine' (Stoney 1971: 9), literally so now that

most camcorders have reversible LCD viewfinders<sup>29</sup>, and certainly much more so than in 1971 when the documentary maker George Stoney celebrated the arrival of portable video: 'Those of us who have ... [been] trying to find a simpler, less threatening way to introduce viewers to the viewed, even viewers to themselves, find these new little mirror machines heady stuff' (ibid: 9). Michael Renov suggests the 'video apparatus ... is both screen and mirror, providing .. a reflective surface on which to register the self' (186). Before both of them Jean Rouch had discovered some of the same 'heady stuff' as Stoney in his film *Chronique d'un été* (1961) in which he cajoled Parisians into 'a very strange kind of confession in front of the camera, where the camera is, let's say, a mirror' (Eaton 1979: 51).

The mirror encourages us into an intimate exchange with ourselves, and the 'to-camera' mirroring set-up of the video diary is an even more powerful way to elicit 'confession in front of the camera' than was available to Rouch in the 1960s. In the UK this was first harnessed by the BBC's Community Programme Unit (CPU), which had been set up in the late 1960s to enable groups and individuals normally excluded from television broadcasting to have 'access' to the airwaves – an access that was, however, always strictly limited by being mediated through CPU staff and professional film crews. When Hi8 camcorders became available in the early 1990s (enabling the production of near-professional images on easy-to-use domestic equipment) the CPU handed them out to selected members of the public, to whom they also offered basic video production training and support during their (often very long) shooting periods. After the diarist had gathered their material with their camcorders, they would then have further support and direction from CPU staff in editing and post-production – a form of much less heavily mediated 'access' than before. These Video Diaries were followed in 1993 by Video Nation, a project in which a diverse group of 50 people were

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<sup>29</sup> These are small screens which can be pointed away from, or in the same direction as, the camera lens so that self-filming subjects can see themselves as they record.

selected from across the UK, given training in the use of camcorders and invited to record aspects of everyday life during the course of a year:

On 7 March 1994 a two minute programme was transmitted on BBC2 under the Video Nation logo. Colonel Gordon Hencher spoke to camera in an understated but powerful way about aging, and the gap between his image and his self-image: 'One doesn't feel old you know. But it's a ghastly thing, to look and see your face, what it is now, and what you feel it should be, inside you ..' (Hencher quoted in Rose 2007: 127-8)



Fig. 11: Gordon Hencher's Video Nation short

Hencher's meditation on what he sees of himself in the mirror<sup>30</sup> was the first of 1,300 Video Nation Shorts made for BBC2 between 1994 and 2000. The project continues to the present on the web<sup>31</sup>. The contact with the self and the vulnerability that the to-camera piece induces is evident in many Video Nation pieces, not least, for example, in the work that Jean Lee did for Video Nation during and after her pregnancy. In *Bump* she describes her obsession with her pregnant belly, how she's never loved any part of her anatomy as much, as she caresses it in close-up; and in *Labour* she films herself at home with the

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<sup>30</sup> Available at [www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/articles/u/uk\\_mirror.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/articles/u/uk_mirror.shtml) (accessed 6/11/09)

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/> (accessed 1/1/09)



Fig. 12: Still from *Bump*

new-born baby in her arms and describes his very long and painful birth, crying as she recalls how her mother and sister were with her during her labour and made her feel loved<sup>32</sup>.

Since this innovative use of video diary production in the 1990s the technique has been incorporated into mainstream television and documentary in a variety of ways. As Biressi and Nunn comment: 'The look of *Video Nation* has been popularised in commercials and popular programming and has become part of the new visual lexicon of "real life" on television'(2005: 19). However, video-diary making remains a way for 'non-professionals' to represent themselves, in the best instances in mainstream media, in a way that is relatively unmediated by professional gatekeepers.

*The Prisoners of the Iron Bars* (Sacramento 2003) is a Brazilian feature-length documentary in which the filmmakers gave inmates camcorders to record their own view of life in Carandiru, a notorious prison in the city of São Paulo. In one sequence 'The night of an inmate', the film features the occupants of one particular cell, trying to, in their words, 'show you about this place, especially at

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<sup>32</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/articles/s/southern\\_bump.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/articles/s/southern_bump.shtml) & [http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/articles/u/uk\\_labour.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/articles/u/uk_labour.shtml) (accessed 1/1/09)

night ... It's hard with words. Maybe it works with images, right?' The sequence conveys an impression of the lives of these prisoners which would have been impossible other than in the video diary form. The prisoners film their morning and evening routines, photos of their families and homes, distant commuter trains passing, and fireworks exploding far away in the dark night outside their cell window. They show how they communicate with a woman in a block of flats opposite the prison, using hand signals, and, in a remarkable scene from the early morning, how they use a mirror to extend what they can see outside their cell window:



Fig .13: Screen grabs from *The Prisoners of the Iron Bars*

UK television has made use of this kind of intimate connection that develops between video diarists and their cameras, not least in a number of instances with younger people. The veteran documentary maker Marilyn Gaunt developed a technique she called 'absentee interviewing'<sup>33</sup> in her film *Kelly and Her Sisters* (2001), which was a sensitive portrait of a very poor, single parent family on a run-down estate. After shooting with the family during the day, she would strap a camcorder to the children's bunk bed and encourage them to record answers to questions she left them with, overnight. The results had an unusual spontaneity and freshness that wouldn't have been achievable in a more formal interview set-up. This was true too of Nicola Gibson's *My Life as a Child*<sup>34</sup>, which was entirely shot by mostly pre-teenage children, on their own and entirely unsupervised

<sup>33</sup> At a Dothouse Masterclass, 21 September 2003, at The Other Cinema, Rupert Street, London.

<sup>34</sup> Six part series from 5 July 2005 on BBC2, series 2 from 29 March 2007, also BBC2.

apart from occasional visits to the family by members of the production team. Their pieces to camera were extraordinarily touching and revealing, often about very difficult issues in their families.

The 'claim on the real' that video-diary making's immediacy and situated subjectivity appear to offer has led to its wide use on television across all factual genres, from video journalists like Sean Langan - who often films himself, hand-held, as he moves through war zones and other challenging environments - to 'info-tainment' and formatted history programmes like *1900 House* (Wall to Wall 1999) and its successors in which the participants are frequently offered the opportunity to record their 'private' thoughts and responses to the day's activity, and 'speak to video camera of their tiredness, fear or pain' (Biressi & Nunn 2005: 110). Any claim on the real or to 'authenticity' that may have accrued to the Video Diary genre must have been seriously questioned (if not finally laid to rest) by its use in the various forms of 'Reality TV', in which issues of (increasingly exaggerated and self-conscious) performance of the self are to the fore. To give just one example from the Channel 4 series *Big Brother* (Endemol 1997-): the Diary Room, which Biressi and Nunn describe as 'the unacknowledged guarantor of the speaker's true feelings' (2005: 20), is certainly a kind of 'private' confessional, but the contestants who use it also must know that they are communicating with the television audience who will vote them in or out of the 'house' on the basis of their performance.

Today, in some ways, the video camcorder's supposed 'claim on the real' - its 'privileged form of TV "truth-telling"', in Dovey's phrase (2000: 55) - has been usurped (as hand-held 16mm film's claim was by the camcorder) by developments in mobile phone technology. As a recent article suggests:

[...] the mobile phone, with its poor, imperfection of resolution and pixillated quality and small aspect ratio is in some ways more 'real', in that everyone has access to the medium and can learn it easily, but more

importantly it captures ‘what I am doing now, in this moment’ (Schleser, Baker & Molga 2009: 111)

The authors of this article go on to valorise the mobile’s

[...] predilection for close-ups and a sense of immediacy – instant, realtime, ‘being here and now’. The portability factor allows for the watching and shooting anywhere, with the intimacy of enabling one to take their phone to private and personal spaces (119).

There is of course a striking similarity between these descriptions of the virtues of the mobile phone as a filming device, and those made by video activists about portable video from the 1970s on, and by Direct Cinema enthusiasts about 16mm film in the 1960s.

In the current environment of mobile telephony, Web 2.0 and social networking and video sharing sites, video diary production is more popular and widespread than ever before: ‘every minute, ten hours of video is uploaded to YouTube’<sup>35</sup> and the video diary is a frequently used form on the YouTube website, by ‘video bloggers, or vloggers - people who regularly record video diaries of their thoughts and feelings and share them with the world’ (Young 2007). In a cementing of the already symbiotic and increasingly ‘converged’ relationship between broadcast television and the web, the *Big Brother* production team have also recently ‘teamed up with YouTube to launch an online auditions channel’ on which ‘hopefuls can upload a one minute audition video to impress producers’<sup>36</sup> – a very public and performative style of video diary making, giving the diarist a shot at celebrity.

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<sup>35</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/t/fact\\_sheet](http://www.youtube.com/t/fact_sheet) (accessed 2/01/09)

<sup>36</sup> *The Guardian*, 31/12/08, p. 10.

## e) 'Post-documentary' culture and 'Reality TV'

Both autobiographical filmmaking and video diary work are integral to current debates about the status of documentary in the new century, contributing to a pervasive sense of crisis and transformation. The editors of a recent volume have characterised these 'significant and ongoing changes' and 'sometimes dizzyingly rapid developments' as

the spread of new digital productions and editing equipment; the increasing 'intimization' (van Zoonen 1991: 217) of content facilitated by this; the continued proliferation of television formats; a so-called 'boom' in theatrical features; and the phenomenon of DIY footage posted on websites like YouTube and Google Video (Austin & de Jong 2008: 1)

As we have already seen, first-person filmmaking has been a feature, and often a driver, of all of these developments, and, of course, a significant contributor to the 'intimization' of content. Van Zoonen's deployment of this term is in relation to thinking through how a 'tyranny of intimacy' provoked by 'the predominance of women newsreaders in Dutch television news' (1991: 217) has challenged the universalist, ungendered assumptions of the conventional, bourgeois, public sphere. As Laura Rascaroli comments:

This is, indeed, a time in which the waning of objectivity and truth as convincing social narratives invites different forms of expression, and different dimensions and ways of engagement with the real – ways that are more contingent, marginal, autobiographical, even private (2009: 190).

Similar challenges and tendencies – and the anxiety they provoke – are being reproduced across virtually all forms of factual media (often focused on the wide range of work known as Reality TV), and they are central to the feeling of the crisis of legitimacy facing documentary filmmaking in the current 'postdocumentary' media environment.

John Corner coined this phrase in his attempt to locate the Reality TV show *Big Brother* in what he called the "postdocumentary" culture of television', showing

'how, within that culture, the legacy of documentary is still at work, albeit in partial and revised form' (2002: 257). He then went on to discuss how this revision centred on issues of 'self-display' (263) and the 'self-in-performance' (265) in the series. This culture, for Corner, marks a departure from 'the defining moments of documentary history, those moments when an expository realism seemed to resonate at least partially with a public rhetoric of reform and progress' (265). Biressi and Nunn, in their book on 'Reality TV', similarly characterise Corner's 'postdocumentary culture' as a

radically altered cultural and economic setting which includes an imperative for playfulness and diversion and the erosion of the distinctions between the public and the private sphere, between the private citizen and the celebrity and between media and social space (2005: 2).

Whilst acknowledging these developments, Brian Winston takes issue with the term 'postdocumentary' because he thinks that '[g]iven the continuities of documentary elements in the new forms and formats, documentary is still very much with us' (2008: 269). Instead of a 'postdocumentary' era, he declares that '[t]he age of post-Griersonian documentary is upon us' (290) - an age in which 'first-person documentaries' are one of the defining characteristics. He welcomes our imminent escape from 'the dead weight of the Griersonian heritage' (275), with its spurious truth claims, and criticises Grierson's pretence that 'his films were reports on the news pages, as it were, when in fact they were editorials for the established order' (274). He looks forward to a post-Griersonian era in which 'the audience's understanding is that what is on offer is indeed [...] a record of a film-maker's subjective interaction with the world' (2008: 290).

In a similar vein, Michael Chanan describes how the shift towards subjectivity and self-inscription in documentary authorship (in and outside television) 'rehearses a withdrawal of documentary from the rhetoric of the public world into a space of personal pre-occupations' (2007: 246). What Chanan calls 'the new documentary wave' - surfed by filmmakers like Michael Moore, Molly Dineen and

Agnes Varda - allows for a new truth regime: 'the truth they insist on telling us no longer pretends to omniscience as it used to, and is no longer delivered as if from on high, but is told from an individual or personal point of view ...' (2007: 6)

The older documentary conventions of 'expository realism' to which Corner refers, and their relation to public life, hark back to Bill Nichols' well-known suggestion that documentary

has a kinship with those other nonfictional systems that together make up what we might call the discourses of sobriety. Science, economics, politics, foreign policy, education, religion, welfare – these systems assume they have instrumental power: they can and should alter the world itself...' (1991: 3).

Many of the documentary critics who have followed Nichols in recent years have taken exception to his formulation, in one way or another. Renov argues that 'Nichols's attribution of sobriety for documentary obfuscates more than it reveals, for documentary is equally a discourse of delirium' (2004: 100). He objects to Nichols' situating 'documentary on the side of conscious rather than unconscious processes, public activity more than psychical reality' (ibid: 98), as, for Renov, 'knowledge and desire are ineluctably intertwined'. Beattie, similarly, wants to force 'a reassessment of documentary practices and theoretical approaches to documentary texts which construct them solely in terms of a discourse of sobriety' and seeks to shift 'the theoretical foundations of documentary towards an acceptance of delirious display' (2008: 128). There's a decidedly gendered flavour to this distinction too: a 'masculine', historical sobriety is being undermined by a 'feminine', hysterical delirium.

The epistemological crisis facing documentary – postulated by Renov and Beattie as a struggle between sobriety and delirium, or by Winston as between pre- and post-Griersonian forms - has of course arisen in a particular social and political time – one in which, for the last forty years at least, the legitimacy of most of the 'systems' with 'instrumental power' in our society has been

questioned. Gendered and class-based systems of how and by whom 'knowledge' is generated and disseminated, have been contested in the media as well as in most other spheres. The BBC Community Programme Unit's work, mentioned above, was one attempt among many to widen access and participation in television, and the result of this contestation has certainly been a vast increase in the diversity (whether in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or (dis)ability) of protagonists in both fictional and factual television (notably docu-soaps and 'reality' television, in the latter category). However, this widening of access has not very radically altered the distribution of power between programme makers and their subjects. Biressi and Nunn note in their discussion of 'House' members' occasional rebellions in *Big Brother* that:

Participants' ability to foil the production is not the same as being able to contribute constructively to representation and seems a somewhat feeble defence by media practitioners against accusations of exploitation or emotional voyeurism (2005: 30).

As Richard Kilborn points out

[...] even when it might *appear* [original emphasis] that ordinary people are being given a voice, closer inspection reveals that their participation is severely constrained. Any talk about democratizing potential has, therefore, to be accompanied by the recognition that the broadcaster is still effectively calling the shots (2003: 189).

In addition Reality TV formats, although they frequently make use of 'ordinary people' as subjects (or victims), are as subject as the rest of contemporary media to the allure (and ratings appeal) of celebrity culture – as the eight series (since 2002) of *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!* (Granada 2002-) attest. Many other Reality TV series make use of the already famous, including two whose themes and subject matter overlap with *A Whited Sepulchre*. *Who Do You Think You Are?* is in its sixth series (Wall to Wall 2004-). Produced for BBC1, each episode features a celebrity researching their family background, taking them on quests that invariably are both physical and (sometimes powerfully) emotional journeys

for them. Despite the personal focus of the series, it does engage with many social and historical issues (perhaps most notably the legacy of the Holocaust in, for instance, the episodes by David Baddiel (23 November 2004), Stephen Fry (25 January 2006), and Jerry Springer (27 August 2008). The series *Empire's Children's* ambitions were more explicitly political and historical, attempting to provide insight into the British empire, again using the device of celebrities (all of whom, for the purposes of this series, had 'imperial' family backgrounds) researching their family histories, which showed how each of them was a 'child of the empire'<sup>37</sup>. Clearly a large part of *A Whited Sepulchre* is concerned with discovering how I too am a 'child of the empire' – albeit from the perspective of a 'nonentity' rather than a 'celebrity'. However, in a wider sense, my project echoes many of the impulses of Reality TV, in its focus on the personal, its 'quest structure', its subjecting the protagonist (me) to a process, often involving 'jeopardy'<sup>38</sup>, and self-discovery.

The affirmation of the self offered by these new forms of television – despite the increase in diversity in who gets shown noted above, remains a scarce resource – there's no room for more than a handful of Jade Goodys in the mediasphere's hall of fame. Nevertheless these forms still offer the promise of affirmation:

Reality TV, then, arguably promotes and caters for the desire to be observed and to have one's existence validated through observation. [...] It foregrounds the ways in which subjectivity more broadly is formed through a matrix of looks, of processes of seeing, being seen and of our self-conscious knowledge of being seen. It suggests that within media culture being publicly regarded can constitute an affirmation of the self (Biressi & Nunn 2005: 102).

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<sup>37</sup> Wall to Wall (2007) - See [www.walltowall.co.uk/news\\_item.aspx?content=146](http://www.walltowall.co.uk/news_item.aspx?content=146) (accessed 6/04/09).

<sup>38</sup> There was a period of a few years in the late 1990s and early 2000s when most Commissioning Editors for factual programming were looking for this quality. No programmes were financed that didn't, in some way, show (or put their) characters in 'jeopardy'.

**Endnote: *'I'm a nonentity, get me out of here!'***

I will return later to the uses of television and autobiographical video in validating one's existence (chapters 3c and 3d below). For now I want to characterise the research project that this thesis describes as being in some ways like a conventional empirical, 'psychological' experiment to acquire knowledge about the subject. I made myself into a laboratory rat in a post-documentary maze - a 'non-entity' who (in the end, very badly) wanted to get out of there – but who, during the experiment, shared the 'belief that to have suffered, to have struggled, to have subjected your life to the camera, becomes the near-guarantee of the production of a new form of knowledge for the viewer' (Biressi & Nunn 2005: 36).

Biressi and Nunn's book on Reality TV concludes as follows:

To borrow an observation from Jon Dovey 'We are all learning to live in the freakshow, it is our new public space' (2000: 4). The question which should perhaps preoccupy us now is how we choose to navigate this space and make it our own (2005: 155).

*A Whited Sepulchre*, and this research project as a whole, has been just such a navigation, an attempt to make this space more intelligible, and my own.

# **Part 3:**

## **The project and 'me'**

### 3a) AK, my mother and me

Bodies are passed down in families [...] the body is the flesh of memory.<sup>39</sup>

I want here to outline aspects of the lives of my mother and her grandfather (AK) that are relevant to my themes - not to try to give my complete family history, but to continue the work of my *Whited Sepulchre* film, in which I tried

to explore connections between 'public' historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender and "personal" memory (Kuhn: 1995).

This (in this writing and before, making the film) has been partly a process of exploring territory close to 'postmemory' as Marianne Hirsch has defined it:

[...] postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or its source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. [...] Postmemory characterises the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth [...] (1997: 22).

I am hesitant in borrowing the term because Hirsch developed it 'in relation to children of Holocaust survivors'. She does 'believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences' (ibid), but this clearly doesn't quite cover my 'fourth-generation' relationship to my great-grandfather and his role in the very different 'holocaust' that Europeans visited on Africa in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Nevertheless there are ways in which we all are 'dominated by narratives that preceded our birth', and my focus on AK in this project has involved me in a good deal of 'imaginative investment and creation'. I certainly empathise, from my own

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<sup>39</sup> Katherine Young, quoted in Probyn (2005: 47).

experience of this project, with Hirsch's characterisation of postmemory as 'often obsessive and relentless'. In what follows I also hope to be able to suggest some ways in which my 'postmemory' has second-generation attributes through my relationship to my mother.

**AK:**

Arthur Kerr Slessor – my great-grandfather – was born on 12 December 1863, the younger of the two sons of John Henry Slessor, the vicar of the parish church at Headbourne Worthy in Hampshire. He came from hardy (originally Scottish) stock, according to a dry and slightly irreverent family memoir written by his niece, Priscilla Napier:

The Slessor antecedents were solid in the extreme. Rendered practically immortal by many generations spent battling with the climate of Aberdeenshire, they descended on the soft south via the British army in the late seventeenth century. John Henry's constitution had been further fortified by the lives of his immediate forebears, which had consisted of hard soldiering, good food, cold baths, faith in God, and a general absence of nervous stress (1966: 30).

AK also had four younger sisters. His mother, Charlotte Fennessy, described by Priscilla Napier as 'an oval-faced black-haired Irish woman' and 'all that was good and sweet' (1966: 29), died of cancer when he was 18, and four years later his father married a Mrs Scudamore, because 'he wanted a chaperone for his growing-up daughters and Mrs Scudamore was quite awesomely respectable' (ibid: 28). However, John Henry 'came to dislike his wife so much that he declined ever to be left alone with her' (28), a feeling shared, apparently, by both his sons. By that time AK was finishing his studies at Oxford, reading 'Greats' at Christ Church, having been elected 'a scholar of the House' (Slessor 1972: 2) in 1884.

When he left Oxford, (unsurprisingly, given the family history) he decided on a career in the army, and won a place at Sandhurst. The copies of his diaries in my

possession start on his 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday, shortly after he had joined the army. He reasoned that would now be able to keep a diary because of the change in his routine from studying at Oxford where

one's business consists so largely of reading and writing that leisure hours for more writing were few and far between; but the greater part of a soldier's work is, I take it, more or less out of doors, or, at least takes the form of active bodily exercise, so that a little occasional writing will be a change from the ordinary routine, and prove, I hope, a source of amusement to myself, and some day, perhaps, to the people that are yet unborn (Slessor 1886-1894).

He writes in his diary about how he came across two diaries in the vicarage at Headbourne Worthy, written by his great-grandmother, which he describes as deeply interesting, full as they are of pictures of the life and manners of a time beyond the memory of anyone now living. Also they shew what manner of men and women Slessors of a former generation were.<sup>40</sup>

He then expands on his theme of diary writing as an escape from the physical labour of soldiering:

[...] if this diary does not come to an untimely end, the object of it is principally for the amusement of a man who, though fond of reading and writing, has yet chosen a career which perhaps calls for less intellectual exercise than is called for in any other profession. At the same time I should be sorry if it were to be destroyed, because [...] most people like to know what their fathers or grandfathers used to do, and how they spoke and thought.

Two things strike me about these entries now: first, his (surprisingly self-reflexive) consciousness of writing his diary, as well as for himself, for posterity and his descendants - for which I am grateful; and second, an undertow of regret about his choice of profession, a sense that he may be denying the intellectual part of

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<sup>40</sup> Where AK's diaries are quoted without references, here and below they are from Slessor 1886-1894.

himself in that choice, with which I empathise, partly because it is a choice I was not forced to make in my own life, and would have hated if I had been in his shoes. He was also disappointed by the regiment to which he was assigned, quoting a letter from the War Office in which 'Her Majesty has approved of your appointment to a Second Lieutancy in the 2<sup>nd</sup> West India Regiment', and commenting: 'Very kind of Her Majesty, but I wish she approved of my appointment to any other regiment'. He had tried to get a commission in both the Indian Staff Corps and the Royal Marines (which he described as 'worth six of the West India Regiment - the last refuge of the aged and destitute'), without success. Nevertheless he quickly acquired a loyalty to Her Majesty and her army, feeling 'quite the soldier, when marching to Church last Sunday with band playing and in full war paint, tunic, war-hat, belt and bayonet'. When he was on parade in London in front of Buckingham Palace on 21 June 1897, Victoria's Jubilee, he remarks: 'Somehow or other, as the Queen came in front of us, a great lump rose up in my throat, together with a great wave of loyalty' (Slessor 1972: 5).

In October 1888 he was sent to join the 2<sup>nd</sup> West India Regiment in the Caribbean, but spent little more than three weeks there before sailing to Sierra Leone, where he was to serve. He first caught sight of the 'bright green' African coast on 26 November, speculating then 'whether there is anything particularly foul within the fair exterior' (Slessor 1972: 11). The impact of Africa on a 25-year-old vicar's son from Hampshire, whose world up until two months previously had been uniformly comfortable, white and middle-class, must have been enormous. He had had barely three weeks of being in a white minority in the West Indies and was now in a country in which, according to an 1881 census, there were only 271 whites (Slessor 1972: 9). The intervening seven years may have seen some increase in the white population, but not a great deal<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> I outline in more detail AK's developing attitudes to race during his stay in Sierra Leone in 3c) below.

He did two tours of duty on the West Coast of Africa - November 1888 to December 1889, and July 1890 to February 1891 - finally returning in that month of 1891 to the UK to convalesce from his sixth bout of fever contracted in 'the white man's grave'<sup>42</sup>. Barely a year later, shortly after returning to his regiment in Jamaica, he succumbed to yellow fever, which once more meant that he 'nearly took a longer journey from which no traveller returns' (as he puts it in his diary):

Yellow fever appears to be one of the most malignant and deadly diseases known. Out of 10 cases of certain yellow fever that have recently occurred here, 8 have proved fatal [...]. Recovery from it in the case of Europeans is exceptional.

Nevertheless AK did recover, and on his return to his regiment

Was saluted with shouts of Lazarus in Camp, where they had quite given me up. All sorts of strange yarns had been floating about there. Someone had informed them my coffin was made and grave dug [...]

AK later underlined these last two words in the diary and wrote 'fact!' in the

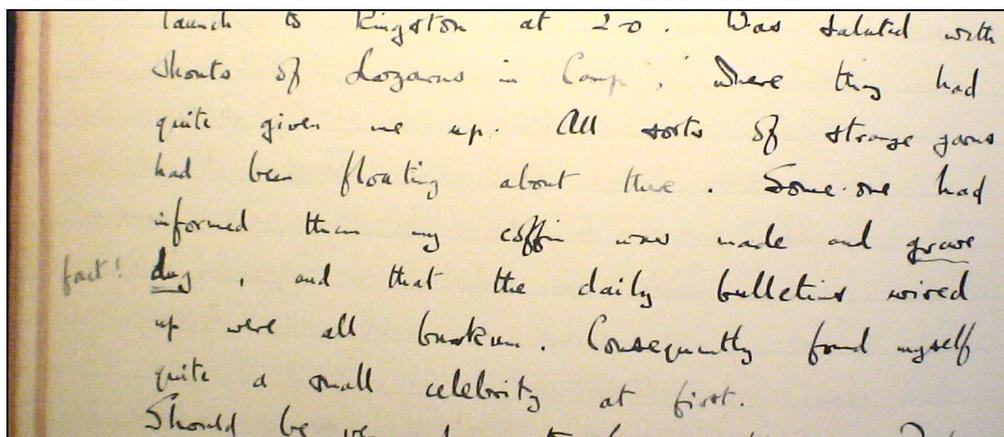


Fig.14

margin (see Fig. 14); apparently he

brought the coffin home to substantiate the tale, and because it is one of those few things that cannot fail to come in useful. In fact he had no need of it for another sixty years. It hung about in the stables, getting underfoot,

<sup>42</sup> AK frequently uses this phrase about Sierra Leone in his diaries, and it seems to have been in common currency in the Victorian era, as the title of a book published in 1888 attests: *Sierra Leone; or, the White Man's Grave* (Banbury 1888).

until someone hit on the notion of making it into a toboggan. (Napier 1966: 33)

I was also told the story of his bringing his coffin home, by AK's niece, Alethea Hayter, in a section of her interview for *A Whited Sepulchre* which I didn't use; yet he doesn't mention it in his diaries of the time. He seems more exercised by the injustice of being given only a month's convalescence leave: 'Hang it all, I do think one ought to get more than a month out of them after Yellow fever, especially if you've had a hole dug for you'.

So here is a man who is able, apparently, to shrug off two very close escapes from death in his twenties, as well as the early death of his mother (who never gets a mention in the diaries) in his late teens. His brother Bert was apparently 'a Slessor in the brave, affectionate and mild tradition', whereas AK, on his return from the West Indies, was

grey eyed and rather more dashing; a magnificently well-made man, with long-jawed throw-away charm; though certainly brave he was not conspicuously affectionate and only intermittently mild. (Napier 1966: 30)

This (drily understated) impression of his character was certainly confirmed by his niece and grandchildren, who used words like 'frightening' and 'irascible' when describing him in later life for *A Whited Sepulchre*<sup>43</sup>.

Very unlike me, AK seems, in fact, throughout his life, to have maintained the Slessor traditions of 'hard soldiering, good food, cold baths, faith in God, and a general absence of nervous stress' (Napier 1966: 30). The only one of these I have any affection or inclination for is 'good food', having grown up pacifist, fond of hot baths and showers, atheist, and what I'm sure would be experienced by all my forebears as bewilderingly neurotic, plagued by 'nervous stress'.

AK was married in 1896 and had three sons and a daughter – the second son, William Rodney, born in 1899, was my mother's father. I find this picture both

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<sup>43</sup> See DVD Scene Selection, Chapter 10.



Fig. 15: AK and his two sons

charming and chilling – the unmistakable pride of a father bringing up two boys in his own militaristic image. The elder son in the middle of the picture – not my grandfather – had a very successful career in the Royal Air Force. He published a book - *Air Power And Armies* by Wing Commander J.C. Slessor (1936) - in which he argued that during a war heavy bombing could be used to destroy enemy morale, and by 1950 he was a Marshal of the RAF and Chief of the Air Staff. When I was born in 1951 my parents chose him as one of my godparents.

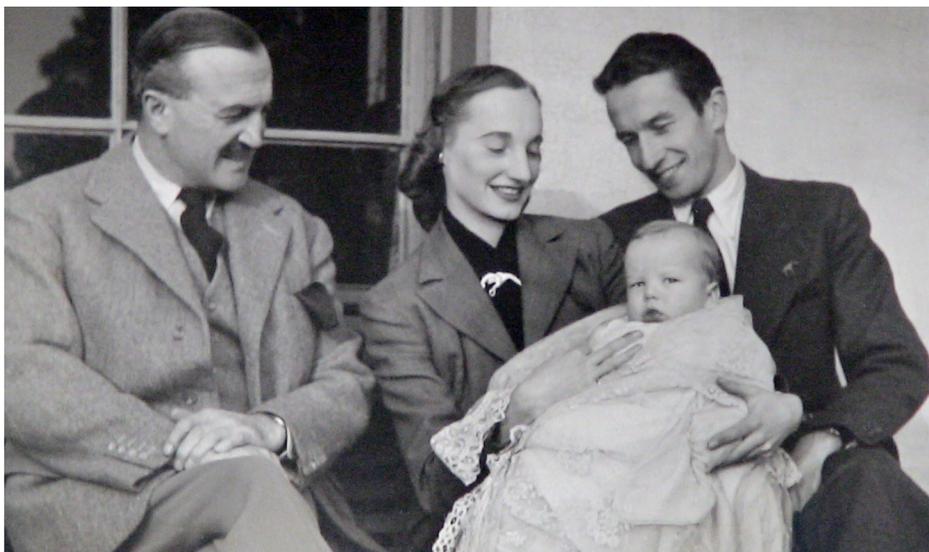


Fig. 16: Me and the Chief of Air Staff - my great-uncle Jack - at my christening

Jack Slessor's father, AK, stayed in the army until after the turn of the century, eventually joining the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battallion Derbyshire Regiment, serving in India, and satisfying his enthusiasm for writing by producing a history of their Tirah campaign (Slessor 1900). In the preface to this volume he appears to admit that his account is partial, and glosses over some of the more brutal and unpalatable details of this colonial campaign in another part of the Empire:

Mistakes must in the nature of things be made, by highest and lowest alike, which in the interests not only of discipline, but also of common courtesy and consideration, it is as well not to dwell upon unnecessarily. Moreover, in the heat and stress of action men's passions may be too fiercely aroused, or their fears unduly excited, and incidents occur which can only become impossible when mankind ceases to be liable to sudden fits of fury or panic, and which it is far more politic to gloss over than to drag into open light [...] (Slessor 1900: vii)

After leaving the army, AK was appointed Steward of his old Oxford college, Christ Church, in 1902. He became well known in the early 1920s for a public dispute with the governing body of the College who wanted to build shops on the south side of the cathedral, as a money-making venture. AK successfully campaigned for a memorial garden to the fallen in the Great War to be placed on the site instead of the shops. His first wife died in 1925, and he remarried (his wife's sister) in 1928. He retired to Holly Grove, the big white house in the Sussex countryside, in the same year, and died there in 1931.



Fig.17: AK and his second wife in the garden at Holly Grove

**My mother (and me):**

AK's second wife survived him until 1948, and bequeathed Holly Grove to my mother, who had recently married my father, a Polish pilot who had arrived in England in 1940 to join a Polish Squadron in the Royal Air Force and fight the Germans. After my mother's inheritance, my parents decided to start a mushroom farm on the land that came with the house. My sister was born at Holly Grove in 1949, and I followed quickly in 1951.

This is a detail of a portrait of my mother in her twenties, very much as I remember her from my childhood:

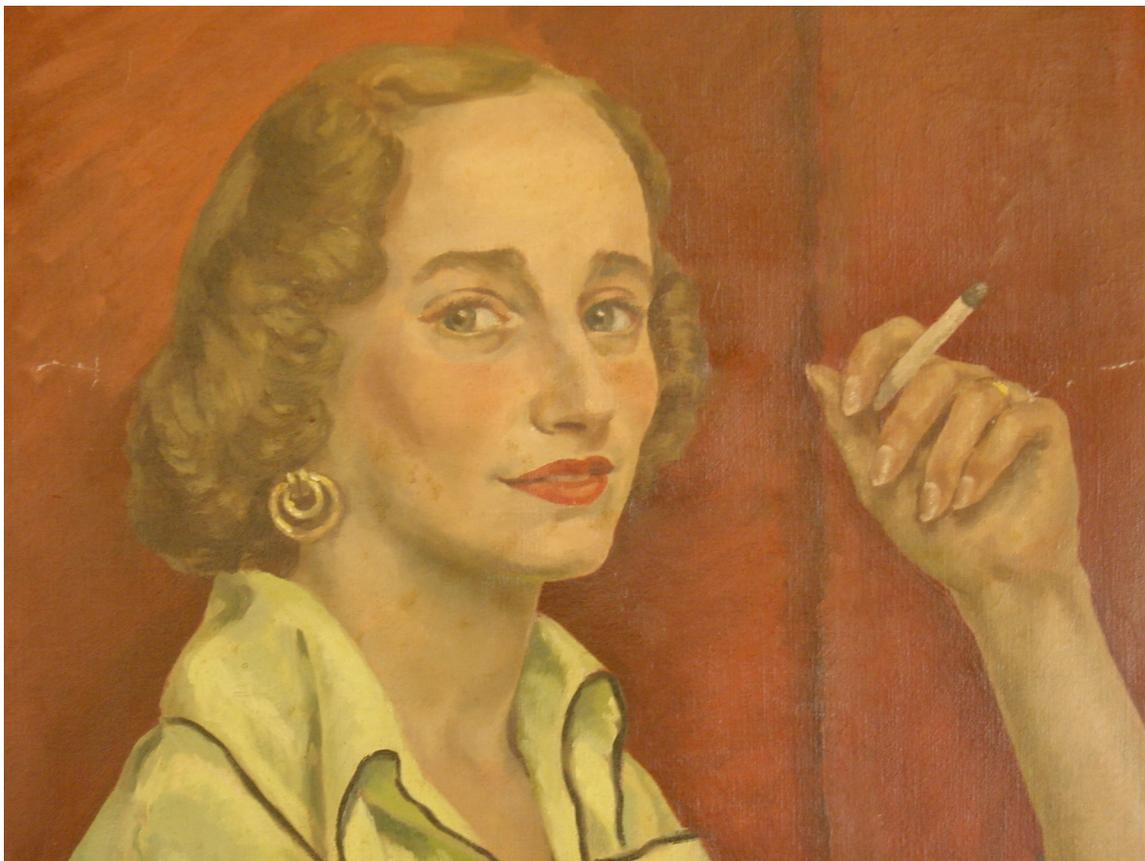


Fig. 18

It was painted in the 1950s by the local vicar's wife. It hung in the dining room at Holly Grove – the first example in my memory of the eerie way a portrait can follow you around a room with its eyes. It is, to me, recognisably my mother, but also strikes me now as a very stylised, glamorous image, reminiscent of other

images of women of its time – almost anonymous. Now, with hindsight, I also see it in the context of my knowledge of her life as a whole: in particular her addiction to cigarettes and a relatively early death, partly caused by alcohol consumption and smoking-induced emphysema.

My mother died in 1995, and my father died in 2003. One of their legacies was the oil portrait above (which I keep hidden under my desk at home – still avoiding those eyes); another was a big bag of family photos, some familiar from my childhood, others glimpsed on mantle-pieces and dressers in the various houses my parents occupied in my adult life, some I don't remember ever seeing before. I want to use them here to suggest a range of contrasting perspectives on my mother's life, and on my relationship with it, partly by looking at this heritage of visual evidence. Of course they are not wholly reliable 'evidence' about the people and events they depict, but mediations firstly with a complex relationship to these 'realities', and secondly filtered through my own memories of these realities. They share the characteristics of all family photography, as Jo Spence and Patricia Holland argue,

operating at this junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconscious. Our memory is never fully 'ours', nor are the pictures ever unmediated representations of our past. Looking at them we both construct a fantastic past and set out on a detective trail to find other versions of a 'real' one. (Spence & Holland 1991: 13-14)



Fig. 19

This is my mother and I on the beach, in the mid 1950s. When I look at it now the first thing I see is that we are both leaning in the same way, maybe looking at something outside the frame, my chubby toddler's body echoing the lean of hers. Looking at it now, I'm frightened for myself. How will I survive my relationship with this beautiful, pale, intense woman hiding behind the dark glasses?

My mother was born thirty years or so before this picture was taken, on the fringes of wealth and privilege, the daughter of her mother's second marriage. Her mother was an Anglo-Irish aristocrat, and her first marriage had been to the Earl of Jersey. He was older than her and died relatively young. She then fell in love with her eldest son's personal tutor - William Rodney Slessor, AK's second son and my mother's father - and their 'upstairs-downstairs' marriage caused a minor scandal in the papers. My mother was very attached to both of them, always describing them in warm, glowing terms. They both died when she was in her teens, and her life after that had little of the material (and perhaps emotional) security that she was born into, and I think at some level always felt entitled to.

She was bright and intelligent, but went to work for the British Council after school, rather than to university – a decision I think she always regretted. She

enjoyed her work, which involved liaising with writers, and harboured ambitions to write herself. I found this article (Fig. 20) in my father's things, from the *Evening Standard* of 16 November 1948:



### **Girl with a figure**

**G**IRL who attracted most attention at this week's film premieres was Diana Slessor (pictured here), niece of Air Chief Marshal Sir John Slessor. She wears a strapless frock of purple velvet of her own design and made from her grandmother's cloak.

In the foyer it was said Miss Slessor has the best figure seen in the West End this year.

Her measurements? Bust, 34in.; waist, 24in.; hips, 35in. In her shoes she is 5ft. 7in. tall.

### **Green eyes**

Miss Slessor is 22. She looks at you with grey-green eyes half veiled by long-lashed eyelids. Her hair is in a thick page-boy roll.

She lives in Kensington with a girl friend, does her own cooking and housekeeping.

Miss Slessor has literary ambitions. At present she is doing honorary welfare work with the Polish Air Force Association.

Fig. 20

The Polish Air Force Association was where she met my father – and then left this apparently glamorous city life behind when she married him. They moved to Holly Grove in the Sussex countryside, where she gave birth to my sister and myself. Unsurprisingly, and in common, I think, with many women of her generation, she often gave off a feeling of thwarted potential, a deep disappointment with the world.

I can still remember interminable conversations with her in the evenings, conversations which, for me, were dominated by a brooding sense of her alcohol-fuelled despair. Her posture was almost always the same, her body curled up in

a corner of the sofa, her back hunched, her eyelids heavy so they seemed to be fluttering, half-closed, her speech slow, slightly slurred, weary and effortful. Whatever we talked about, the pattern was always the same, leading inexorably to her concluding once again to herself that she was worthless, her life meaningless. I don't have any photos of her to illustrate this part of her – a testimony to the selectivity of the family album – but this was a favourite cartoon she kept in a large frame in her bedroom:

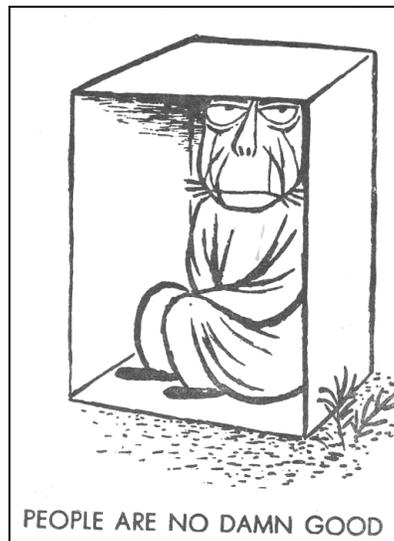


Fig. 21

along with pictures of my father, my sister, me and a few of her close friends.

Although this was the only image I have to show this embittered side of her, there were plenty to illustrate the aspects of her I adored. Before going out to parties she would come to say goodnight to my sister and I in our bedroom, showing off her dress. She'd be framed in the doorway of our bedroom, radiant in a halo of light from the passage, a waft of newly applied perfume reaching us:



Fig. 22

actually, I'm not at all sure about the accuracy of my memory of the perfume – I may be remembering Ronald Fraser talking to his psychiatrist in his memoir, *In Search of a Past*:

'In the evenings sometimes when I was in bed my mother would come in to say goodnight. She wore long evening dresses that rustled and she came in so lightly that she seemed to float, and there was a scent she wore which remained in the air after she'd gone. She was there only a moment, I can feel myself still reaching out to her as she floated away, unable to stay because ... because she had to go out to dinner or something. There was an intimacy but also a distance between us' (1984: 92).

I empathise wholeheartedly with Fraser's description of the heady mixture of intimacy and distance, which he ascribes to the his feeling that

on the one hand she was like a distant goddess who could work miracles, while, on the other, she was paradoxically powerless to change those steps that lay, like granite, before you on the ascent to adulthood (73).

The most obvious of these granite steps, for me, was my being sent away to boarding school, aged nine – a year or two later than many other boys in my

situation, but young enough to feel like it was a cold exile from the emotional nourishment of home. However, how much of this nourishment was actually available to me from my mother (or father) before this exile I'm not sure of. When I've explored my distance from my mother in psychotherapy, I have a sense that my reaching out to her, discovering that she was unavailable, then withdrawing and deciding not to reach out again, was a pattern established in me well before the age of nine<sup>44</sup>. I think because of her sense of her own thwarted potential, and difficulties and estrangements early on in her marriage to my father, she trained her emotional searchlight on me, seeking both some of the emotional sustenance she had been used to as a child from her parents (and wasn't getting from my father), and looking to me to fulfill my potential (as she saw it) in ways she had been unable to fulfill hers. This made her both emotionally demanding, and harshly critical when I didn't conform to her expectations.

Earlier even than those memories is my deeper, somatic sense of physical and emotional deprivation, of not having been held, hugged or physically nurtured by her. She once told me that shortly after I was born she had a minor 'nervous breakdown', for which she saw a psychiatrist. I never discovered the details about this, but it certainly chimes with my sense of our distance in my early childhood, and my resulting weak sense of self, or my 'narcissistic wound', as psychotherapist Linda Marks defines it:

The wound to heart and psyche that gets called narcissism occurs when a child's vulnerable and core sense of self is not seen and reflected back by the adults around him/her. [...] Parents have to be present to be mirrors – to bear witness and reflect back. [...] When a parent's own woundedness and unmet needs override their ability to be present to a child [...] the child's core sense of self can be lost, fragmented or undeveloped. (Marks 2007).

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<sup>44</sup> I draw on these feelings in *A Whited Sepulchre*, Scene Selection 8. More of the sequence of my work in the therapy group (featured in Scene 8) is also available to view on the DVD, Extras 2.

Of course, my alienation from my mother and loneliness in my childhood remains mostly invisible in the family photos I inherited, reflecting the selectiveness and one-sidedness of many family albums<sup>45</sup>: we tend to want to record smiling holidays rather than everyday miseries. Much more evident in the photographs - and in many ways equally true - is that I had a lovely, happy childhood, playing with my sister in the big garden at Holly Grove:



Fig. 23:

For me then, as for Ronald Fraser, 'The garden is also my freedom, I can roam in it alone, be myself, be the dirty little boy they don't want to know about ...' (137).

Fraser and I also share, from our childhoods, a profound alienation from our class backgrounds, mirroring the distance from our parents: 'on the one hand objectively a member of the privileged class I was, on the other, unable subjectively to fill the role into which I was born' (91). Despite knowing he was 'the little master ... A being of innate superiority', he nevertheless 'felt condemned to an equally profound sense of nullity' (75). I think for me, as well as for Fraser perhaps, this feeling of 'nullity' came from a suspicion that the people around us to whom we were supposed to be superior often seemed to be having a better time than us, to be living warmer, more emotional lives. 'With Bert I felt free' (78), says Fraser, of the gardener he followed around as a child. Bert explained to him in his interview for *In Search of a Past*:

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<sup>45</sup> A concept made familiar, as we've seen by the work of Jo Spence among others. See Spence & Holland 1991.

Well, I had more to do with you, telling you things, than ever your father and mother did. [...] The majority of the time you were with me, it was more of a life for a boy up in my old house than down there in your big house, happier altogether. There was no home life for you like there is in the poor class. There may be no brass, but they do get a family life with their parents. You never had that ...' (78-9)

Once, when I was ten or so, my mother was instructing me in 'proper manners', perhaps to prepare me for a visit from a male relative, or in response to my behaviour during such a visit. She said that I should always address men as 'sir', never by their first names. I immediately smelt a rat. I had received no such instructions in relation to the men who worked for my father on the farm. Tom and Bill were warm and friendly, I enjoyed being with them, and I addressed them by their first names. I remember pointing this out to my mother, and asking (with mischievous, feigned naivety) why the same shouldn't apply to all the older men in my life. Of course I knew the reason (probably without being able to articulate it), but I still remember my sense of the hypocritical double standard – fuelled by my certain feeling that I was treated better by Tom and Bill than by most of my mother's friends and relations.

In the end the relative affluence of my parents' lives during my childhood came to an end. My father lost a lot of money to some unscrupulous business associates and narrowly avoided bankruptcy by selling the mushroom farm and Holly Grove, which was an enormous blow to my mother, confirming her bitterness about the 'downward mobility' of her life. They moved to a much smaller house (Fig. 24):



Fig. 24:



Fig. 25:

Studying and comparing the pictures of my mother and father together that I had inherited, I thought I saw the complexity and disappointment of their later years. The contrast with this photo (Fig. 25) from the first years of their time together - a carefree and (to me) startlingly flirtatious picture from their courtship - seemed to confirm the distance they had traveled away from each other.

When my parents were forced to move (I was about 20) my mother had our two golden retriever dogs put down - because they were old and wouldn't survive the move, she said. But I always thought the decision to get rid of them came more from her bitterness about being forced out of the family home. Our life during my childhood had been full of golden retrievers, and I think they provided me with a lot of the physical affection and love I was never able to feel from my mother. I found this account of a dream from a journal I was keeping over 30 years ago:

I'm sitting on the floor, the dog's soft panting head in my lap, its throat cut, its life blood pouring slowly away ... I didn't cut its throat, but I'm guilty and responsible in some way. (I certainly didn't fight to prevent it from being killed).



Fig. 26

As I sifted through the family photos, I began studying pictures of my mother on her own, from her later, more unhappy years, back through the time of her parenting me, to before I'd been born when she was a young person with a whole future in front of her:



Fig. 27<sup>46</sup>:



Fig. 28:

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<sup>46</sup> I was puzzled by the laughter during a conference presentation of this material, when this image appeared on screen. It was the porcelain pig in the window, of course – an instance of Barthes' 'punctum' (1993: 51) to the audience; but not to me, as the pig was so familiar to me from my childhood I barely noticed it.

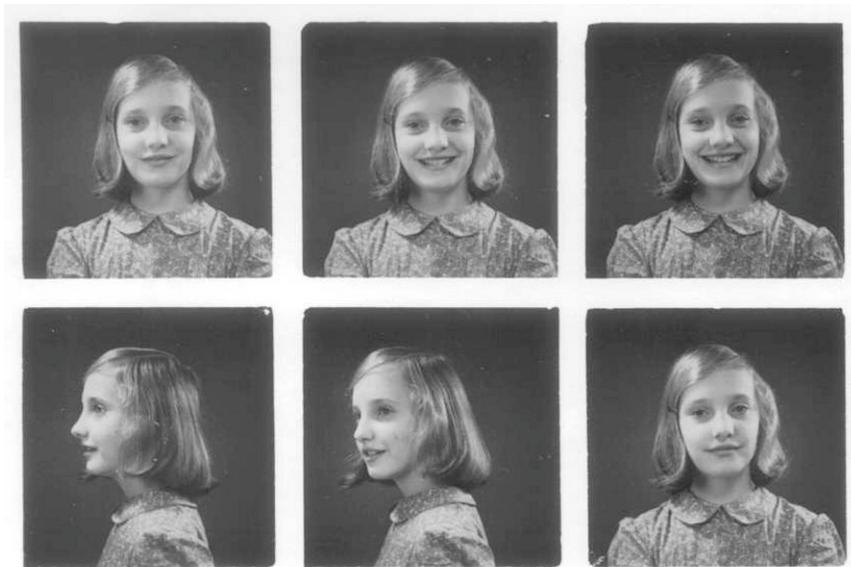


Fig. 29

When I look at these images of her as a child I have a contrasting feeling to that described by Barthes when he came across the Winter Garden Photograph of his mother with her brother, when she was five:

There I was in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved.

And I found it (1993: 67).

Thirty pages later he describes it as the only photo which has given me the splendour of her truth ... a lost, remote photograph, one which does not “look” like her, the photograph of a child I never knew. (1993: 103)



Fig. 30

The above photo is of my mother and her brother (not Barthes' mother and uncle<sup>47</sup>) at about the same age. In all these photos of my mother as 'a child I never knew' I saw not the truth of her as I knew her in her life, but, I felt, a truth about her before her life (as I saw it) started to go so wrong - a person separate from me and my painful memories of our relationship. I'm aware that this is my fantasy about her adolescence and childhood, but for me it is corroborated by some of the photos of her as a young person, particularly by these Polyfoto images (Fig. 31). I asked a colleague of mine at Goldsmiths - Jane Stobart - to animate them for me for *A Whited Sepulchre*<sup>48</sup>:

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<sup>47</sup> He famously refused to reproduce his photo in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1993: 73).

<sup>48</sup> See DVD Scene Selection, the end of Scene 8.



Fig. 31

As the images flickered to life like an old, silent black and white movie, I was reminded of how my mother once described to me an experience from her early teens. She was standing in a field (of hay, I think) in the warm sun, and feeling deeply, wonderfully happy and connected to everything around her. She had moved with her family to the Oxfordshire countryside to avoid the blitz. But in the way she told it, this experience was a great deal more than the relief of escaping the city and the threat of German bombs. It was as though she were glimpsing into the core of her being, and feeling the joy of being alive.

### 3b) The empire, race and me



Fig. 32: 'Am I not a Man and a Brother' –  
Abolitionist Medallion by Josiah Wedgwood

These niggers crowd to church, and even attend Communion in considerable numbers but they live like animals most all the week ... I don't believe he [the nigger] has the intellect to grasp any idea that does not immediately appeal to his senses. It's all very well for people at home to expatiate on the man and brother business but if they were to come out and look at him for themselves I'm sure that they would sing to another tune. He's very far short of a brother and I have doubts whether he is even a man and not rather one of the beasts that perish. One thing that I am fairly sure of, i.e. that as a slave with a considerate master, he would be more likely to acquire some real civilization than he does as a free man (from AK's diaries: Slessor 1972: 27).

My project, as I elaborated it, was to try to understand the making of this particular group of colonisers: that was my task, from where I stood, the politics of my particular location, driven by my 'trans-generational haunting' (Hall 2002: 8).

Whilst I'm not claiming that there is any direct connection, any simple inheritance by me of my great-grandfather's attitudes (as exemplified in the first quotation above), I do feel a 'trans-generational haunting', resonances – as well as differences – between me now and him then, mediated in part through my more directly experienced relationship with my mother. In this chapter I explore this in different ways, believing with Sven Lindqvist that 'the national debt is passed on

from generation to generation' (2007: 11). He was describing the inescapability - as a Swede - of his involvement with Swedish 'neutrality' in the Second World War. I believe that all of us who were brought up or live in Britain owe similar - mostly still unacknowledged - national debts because of our heritage of Empire.

My early experiences of race were conditioned by my being a boy in the country in Sussex - as well as in fee-paying boarding schools. I was conscious from an early age that my father was Polish - he and his friends spoke with 'funny' accents and he occasionally returned to Poland to see his family. I imagined his destination (before doing much geography at school) as being right at the borders of my known world, somewhere North East of London (about where I now know Colchester to be on the map!). I was very occasionally made aware of my 'difference', by other boys at school abusively calling me 'Polak', but I knew my difference wasn't quite as extreme as that of, say, the few Jewish boys at my two schools (where I don't remember there being any black, Asian or Afro-Caribbean pupils at all). However, for a few months during my teens my father employed a young Afro-Caribbean man on his farm - a 'black boy' my mother called him - whose name was also Tony. I can still remember the Oedipal frisson I felt when my mother described, with some erotic fascination, how muscular 'Black Tony' was when he took his shirt off in the farmyard. I also remember how she used to use words like 'simple' about him as though he were less complicated, more 'natural', than 'us'.

AK was also prone to eroticising his racial others in Sierra Leone, who were capable of attracting as well as repelling him. In the diaries he upbraids them for not cultivating gardens: 'These niggers don't seem to appreciate flowers: I believe they care for nothing that does not appeal to their stomachs or lower senses' (1972: 34); but he is also capable of a perhaps more generous cultural relativism, particularly when he is describing young women:

A dainty damsel had just filled a calabash of water [...] and walked up in front of us, dressed in the distinctive garb of the marriageable maiden,

which consists merely of a thick girdle of small coloured beads, with a strip of cloth two or three inches wide hanging down as far as the knee before and behind and is certainly calculated to shew off to the best advantage the really pretty figures which the maidens of that country possess at that age ... (1972: 106)

There is no mock modesty about the native lady. She herself, until she marries, goes naked and is not ashamed [...] The necessity that we natives of cold climates are under of covering ourselves with garments has produced in us conventional notions of false modesty that are soon thrown off when we find ourselves in the midst of the more natural conditions of life in these tropical lands. (98)

Older women, however, are less alluring for him, as in this passage when he has just paid off a trader in Freetown:

Rather an alarming woman too. Last time I paid her she flung her arms round me and goodness knows what wouldn't have happened if there hadn't been a big Mess Corporal standing by, who came to the rescue. However I don't think she'll try any more embraces. (56)

AK is generally more approving of the 'savages, pure and simple' who live in the interior, in 'more natural conditions' - as opposed to Freetown 'with its insolent veneer of European civilization' (95) - and sees these 'savages' as living in a state of pre-lapsarian grace: '... we came upon a party of native ladies bathing in a stream [...] They were no whit abashed, these daughters of Eve' (102). Of course this state means that they remain inferior to the white man, sleeping without a 'pillow, or anything in the way of covering. They lie down to sleep just like animals' (102). Humanity's (or at least white people's) expulsion from the Garden of Eden has enabled us to become consciously religious and therefore human, unlike the black man, who is 'one of the beasts that perish', and therefore, who can never, according to AK's logic, be a 'man and brother' (27). This logic is not peculiar or personal to AK only, of course. His posting to Sierra Leone was at the height of a particular phase of imperial expansion - the

'scramble for Africa' by many European countries, including Britain, which involved giving up the notion (or pretence) that the empire was a partnership with the natives, and the consequent tightening of direct white rule in most British colonies. AK was a young man beginning his service in the empire at the end of a period which Catherine Hall, in her history of the time, describes as being centrally concerned with establishing racial hierarchies:

Processes of differentiation, positioning men and women, colonisers and colonised, as if these divisions were natural, were constantly in the making, in conflicts of power (2002: 17).

In fact Hall's description of 'the making of an imperial man, Edward John Eyre' (20) - a story that maps 'the shift from black peoples as brothers to black peoples as a new kind of other' (65) - is closely reflected in the progress of AK's thoughts as he writes them in his diaries. His need to dehumanise black people, to see them as less than men and brothers, as childlike and incompetent, clearly chimed with the ideological needs of the British imperial project at the time.

Nevertheless much of his writing about black people in the diaries is tinged with a kind of nostalgia, and grudging respect for the pre-lapsarian innocence he sees around him. His encounter with the 'dainty damsel' quoted above prompted this generalisation:

I suppose all savage women walk and carry themselves well. The absence of stays, high heeled boots and similar encumbrances, together with the practice they follow from earliest infancy of balancing anything they have to carry on their heads, all tends in the direction of upright and graceful walking; and similarly in the case of men you never see anything like the clumsy waddle which I suppose heavy walking in ponderous boots produces in the British labourer (106).

However, he soon returns to his own cultural biases in a passage about how he sees his job as an officer with his men, when they were posted outside Freetown:

I've a great belief in dress as a civilizing tendency. The men up there [in the bush] were very much inclined to relapse into savagery<sup>49</sup>, and dressing them up as for Church parade in barracks helped to remind them they were still soldiers. It was a lesson which officers too have needed at Robari before now. One in particular so far forgot himself after a long stay there as to go out in the village and dance starko with the natives, not a very edifying spectacle for his men. That officer has now happily left us (112).

My own history and orientation to imperial history has of course been different to AK's, though inflected by some of the same forces, four generations later. In what follows I will explore my particular 'trans-generational haunting' through my identification with three men shaped by their particular relationships to the story of Empire: T.E. Lawrence (mostly as he is portrayed in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)), Joseph Conrad and George Orwell.

### ***Lawrence of Arabia and The Sheep:***

We are influenced by our readings of cinema and other cultural artifacts as we grow up in complex ways, inflected by our diverse subject positions. To give just one instance, Valerie Walkerdine discusses how viewing *My Fair Lady* (Cukor 1964) as a (working-class) child affected her. She was entranced by the transformation of Audrey Hepburn into a princess. What she was, what I was, was presented as so very sordid, so very worthless, compared to what was on offer: rags to riches, pauper to princess. Glamour, excitement, exotic Otherness. New worlds of wealth and glamour and plenty. (Walkerdine 1996: 106)

Whereas for me, watching the same film, the 'exotic Otherness' came in the scene at Ascot where she inadvertently swears and scandalises the other

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<sup>49</sup> AK was a junior officer in the West India Regiment, in which all the privates were Black Afro-Caribbean (and all the officers white).

aristocratic race-goers, shouting at the horse she has placed a bet on to ‘move yer bloomin’ arse’. She was, at that moment, for me an exotic model of potential, exciting transgression in an upper-class environment with which I felt familiar (and from which I felt alienated). What we experience as transgression is clearly inflected by our social locatedness, and the rules we rub up against in those locations. So a similar transgressive flavour attracted me to *Lawrence of Arabia* in David Lean’s film (1962), as I witnessed him diverging from his army training and class background, and ‘going native’ with the Arabs. I’m not alone in entertaining a kind of autobiographical reading of the film: Steven Caton uses what he calls ‘snippets of my own life and career to help illuminate the film from a particular angle’ (1999: 20), and his ‘consubstantial identification with Lawrence as he was constructed in the movie’ (141). I’ll be referring to Caton’s work in what follows.

I want to look particularly at the parallels between two very different films that were produced within a couple of years of each other, in the early 1960s: the 2.5 hour Cinemascope epic *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The Sheep*, an 8mm, 8 minute-long home movie I made with a school teacher when I was 13 years old (which features in *A Whited Sepulchre*<sup>50</sup>). The contrasts between them – in scale, budget, audiences, world fame – seemed too great (not to say ridiculous) to put them together, when I first worked on the idea. However, spurred on by the memory of *Lawrence* being my favourite film at the time we were making *The Sheep*, it soon became more than a joke (although I hope I haven’t completely lost sight of the absurdity of the comparison). It is clear that *Lawrence* has had a similarly powerful effect on a number of people, including Steven Spielberg, who is quoted by Caton as saying ‘After the experience of seeing *Lawrence of Arabia*, I never wanted to do anything else with my life but make films’ (3). In his attempt to discover the appeal of *Lawrence*, Caton reports that he talked to the manager of his local video store whose favourite film it also was. She reflected that ‘It’s the *Heart of Darkness* theme that I find intriguing’ (4).

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<sup>50</sup> The whole film is viewable on the DVD, Extras 3.

I became interested in the ways in which these two films – despite their vast and obvious differences – address similar themes, very personal to me, centring on the construction of, and conflicts within, white, male, middle-class English identity in the ‘post-imperial’ 20<sup>th</sup> century. I’ll try to address some of these similarities in what follows here. My aim is to explore the central parallels in the two films as they deal with the issues of identity and ‘imperial service’ (Lawrence in the desert, me – somewhat more prosaically – in the Boy Scouts in rural Sussex) and our relationship to each of our ‘others’: Lawrence’s Arabs and my sheep.

I made *The Sheep* in collaboration with Sid Templer, my English teacher from the age of 10 to 13 at my Sussex prep school. In the film I played a disaffected Boy Scout on a camping trip, isolated from the rest of his ‘troop’, who befriends the sheep. The script was very much a collaboration between myself and Sid, who was in his very early twenties, and so a bit like an older brother, when he started teaching us. He was from an army family – his father had been a General – but was to some extent rebelling against his background. He was in the first generation after the Second World War of young men who didn’t have to do National Service in the forces – the generation that spearheaded the various social and cultural revolutions in the UK in the early 1960s, and produced, for instance, the satire movement and *Beyond the Fringe*<sup>51</sup>. He was also the first adult I encountered in my childhood who I felt really understood who I was (rather than who they thought I ought to be). He befriended me and a number of the other boys who were out of sympathy with the ‘hearty’, sports-oriented, and class-bound norms of private schooling in the early 1960s. I was 13 when we co-devised and made *The Sheep*. Its first title was *The Ninety and Nine*, a Biblical reference, Luke Chapter 15:

And he spoke this parable unto them, saying:

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<sup>51</sup> *Beyond the Fringe* was a British comedy stage revue written and performed by Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett, and Jonathan Miller. It played in Britain’s West End and on New York’s Broadway in the early 1960s, and is widely regarded as seminal to the rise of satire in 1960s Britain. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beyond\\_The\\_Fringe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beyond_The_Fringe) - accessed 29/12/08)

What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?

And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me: for I have found my sheep which was lost.

In *The Sheep* I take the sheep for a walk, and end up taking a nap by a railway line while the animal grazes on the tracks, and is run down by a train. I haul the sheep's corpse back to the camp and bury it, but am ridiculed by the other Scouts who jump up and down on the grave, and finally I walk off into the distance (Fig. 33).



Fig. 33



Fig. 34

This (Fig. 34) is a photograph Sid took of me in my boiler suit which I wore (when out of school or Scouting uniform) during the same time period in which we made *The Sheep*: an 'outsider' figure in the comfortable, loose-fitting and (for me at the time) defiantly working-class garment. I reproduce it here because it reminds me of the shot towards the end of *The Sheep* (Fig. 33) when I turn my back on the other boys who have just desecrated the grave, but also suggests, in a more remote way, the lone figure of Lawrence in the desert, isolated in the wide-screen landscape.

So now I'll make the apparently abrupt transition from the Sussex countryside to the sands of Arabia. Watching *Lawrence of Arabia* when it was first released

made me (like Spielberg) want to become a filmmaker. I used to have a Dinky toy of a BBC outside broadcast van (with a little plastic cameraman on top) and I remember playing 'David Lean making *Lawrence* in the desert', enjoying the sense of mastery I imagined Lean would have felt as he deployed his cast of actors over the dunes. At a less conscious level I also became interested in Lawrence as the 'tortured hero' figure. Jonathan Rutherford describes Lawrence as:

a man who was grappling with contradictory emotions, loyalties and identities .. His identification with the Arabs and their culture displaced the centred position of his identity as a white man<sup>52</sup> (1990: 9).

As the original scriptwriter<sup>53</sup> of *Lawrence* put it: 'On one side he wanted to become Arab but could not, on the other he was ashamed to remain English' (quoted in Caton 1999: 101). Rutherford has a similar childhood background in the upper middle classes to mine, and an adult commitment to left-wing politics, again similar to mine. He suggests this is part of Lawrence's appeal:

Perhaps this explains my fascination with the Lawrence myth and why it works for me as a metaphor of uncertainty. For those of us positioned within the privileged discourses and structures of power, who have crossed those demarcation zones through friendship, love affairs and marriages, or in our political activities and solidarities, that often intimate, unsettling and disruptive relation between the centre and the margin displaces us. (1990: 12)

It's this 'unsettling and disruptive relation', this displacement (Rutherford's and my own sense of being of or from a class, but out of sympathy with it) that is at the heart of what I want to say about my feelings about *Lawrence* and *The Sheep*. In my case it is compounded by the fact of my father's being Polish, and the sense of slight 'otherness' this gave me as I grew up and went to school in the England of the 1950s and '60s. Caton too describes his 'entry into the culture

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<sup>52</sup> ... and, I would add, as a member of the imperial officer class.

<sup>53</sup> The authorship of the script is disputed – see Caton (1999) Chapter 3.

of white, middle class America' when he arrived as an immigrant from West Germany in 1959, and how this 'might help explain the impact the movie *Lawrence of Arabia* had on me when I saw it in 1963' (142). Both of us, because of the subtle differences from those around us derived from our particular ethnicities, felt on the periphery, de-centred.

At one point in *Lawrence of Arabia* Lawrence has just crossed the Sinai desert – an act of arrogance to show Sharif Ali (the character played by Omar Sharif) that he could perform this feat – losing one of his two Arab servant boys on the way in a quicksand. He and the survivor, Faraj, arrive back in the British-controlled world of the Suez canal. A British army motorcyclist pulls up on the opposite bank of the canal and shouts at them 'Who are you? WHO ARE YOU?'



Fig. 35

Lawrence - in a long-held, agonised close-up - has no answer to this question (Fig 35). His time in the desert with the Arabs has more than (in Rutherford's words) 'displaced the centred position of his identity as a white man' (1990: 9), it has literally made him forget who he is. Caton also describes how, in this scene, the 'close up of Lawrence's masklike face [...] evokes the psychological alarm within' (97), and later how

as we identify with him we begin the process of our own self-reflection or autocriticism. 'Who are you? We ask of him: and of ourselves we ask, 'Who are we [original emphasis]?' (129)

In the next sequence Lawrence and Faraj get a lift to the British Army Headquarters in Cairo, where Lawrence, still in Arab costume, insists on taking Faraj into the Officers' mess for a drink, much to the horror and consternation of his fellow soldiers and officers (both because of his - Lawrence's - costume, and because Faraj, as an Arab, is not allowed in the mess). They are eventually rescued by Harry, a senior officer who is impressed by Lawrence's story about how he and his Arab army have just taken the Red Sea port of Akaba, previously regarded as impregnable. Harry agrees to take him to see General Allenby, but as he escorts Lawrence out of the mess, he remarks: 'You better get into some trousers too', earning him a withering look from Lawrence. I'll get back to the issue of dress later. For now I want to stress how this scene underlines Lawrence's displacement by quoting Lawrence's words from *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*<sup>54</sup>:

[...] the effort for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me [...] I had dropped one form and not taken on the other [...] with a resultant feeling of intense loneliness in life, and a contempt, not for other men, but for all they do ... (Lawrence 1962: 30)

This 'intense loneliness' feels to me to be quite close to the position my character adopts in *The Sheep*. Both Lawrence and the character I play are - in some ways reluctant - soldiers in British Imperial Armies: Lawrence obviously, my character because he is in the Boy Scouts. Graham Dawson has characterised Baden Powell's Scouting movement as a place

where we see the transference of the masculine skills and virtues identified with the imperial frontier to the English countryside [...] and their enlistment in national defence that is both imaginative and literal. Here, the

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<sup>54</sup> These were, of course, written by the 'real' Lawrence, not the Peter O'Toole character! However, Robert Bolt used *Seven Pillars* as a primary source for his script for the film.

link between the heroic fantasies of boyhood and political mobilization of the nation achieved a new and institutional form (Dawson 1994: 151). Without being able to articulate it fully in the early 1960s, I remember both sensing and resenting how Scouting was intended to mobilise us into some kind of nationalistic, post-imperial project. The uniforms, the strange ritualistic chanting, and the hierarchical and quasi-militaristic ranking all made me uncomfortable and (passive-aggressively) rebellious – a lonely, isolated and contemptuous stance towards the Scouting conventions in which I was caught up, and which is explicitly played out in *The Sheep*.

Dawson says of *Seven Pillars*: 'its imagining of the divided self is shaped ... in the encounter with the otherness of Arabia' (204). At the risk of sounding absurd, I'm tempted to say that *The Sheep*'s imagining of (my) divided self 'is shaped ... in the encounter with the otherness' of the sheep. There is a way in which, in the film, I adopt and look after the sheep in the face of the indifference of, and finally rejection by, my fellow Boy Scouts, that reminds me of Lawrence's championing of Faraj in the mess in the face of the racism of his fellow officers in the sequence I described above. *The Sheep* is full of ironic little montage sequences designed to point up the alienation of my character from the norms of Scouting that the others follow: I tend to the sheep while they get on with useful activities like map reading; I wipe the sheep's eyes with a corner of the Union Jack flag that had been hanging on the tent (Fig. 36). Towards the end of the film I make a cross for the sheep's grave while they practise knot tying on their staves (Fig. 37) (from what I remember, knot-tying was the main activity in the Scouts), and they strike camp and pull the tent pegs out of the ground while I pick daisies again for the



Fig. 36



Fig. 37

grave. And finally, back towards the start of the film, they stride off purposely and fully, properly dressed with their maps, while I meander off with the sheep, non-regulation shirt sleeves hanging out and without my Scout's beret - which brings me back to the issue of dress.

At the start of the sequence depicting Lawrence's interview with General Allenby, Allenby is reading out his file, which describes Lawrence as 'undisciplined, unpunctual, untidy', but includes a long list of his intellectual accomplishments, leading Allenby to conclude that he is an 'interesting man, no doubt about it'. This was very much how I would have liked to be described at school – a sort of tousled, non-conformist, apprentice intellectual. Later in the same scene comes Lawrence's confession to Allenby that he enjoys killing – an occasion of emotional openness that Allenby tries to close down by getting up abruptly from his desk. With his sharp question 'What do you mean by coming here dressed like that?' Allenby uses the issue of dress and uniform to move away from the uncomfortable emotional territory that Lawrence has opened up, and to regain control of the conversation by ridiculing his Arab clothes. There's an extra poignancy here, because although his white robe is dirty from the journey through Sinai, it was given to him - in a key scene earlier - in recognition of his spectacular rescue of a Bedouin in the desert earlier in the film, when the Arabs salute him as 'He-for-whom-nothing-is-written'. However, it is clearly not masculine military garb - Caton remarks that when Lawrence is presented with it

'the Robe is dazzlingly white and, to Western eyes, makes him appear more like a blushing bride than a military hero' (84). After Allenby has left his desk, he takes hold of Lawrence's Arab headgear and asks 'What do you think I would



Fig. 38

look like in this Harry?' (Fig. 38). 'Damned ridiculous sir!' Harry replies and Allenby hands back the kuffiyeh to Lawrence. The gulf between the 'blond Bedouin's' divided selves is clear<sup>55</sup>: an emotionally expressive man in a 'feminine', flowing robe, who is required to be a tight-lipped, buttoned-up, uniformed officer.

Even so, the interview ends well for Lawrence. He returns in triumph to the Officers' mess to have a drink with Allenby – to the accompaniment of martial music on the soundtrack, his identity crisis temporarily suspended as he is welcomed back into the imperialist fold. However, we are made aware in the very next scene that Allenby will betray the Arabs with whom Lawrence is fighting, by going back on his offer of artillery to them. The whole sequence is a good illustration of what Dawson calls 'the inescapability of colonial relations, and the necessity of finding some place to occupy within them' (224). I can empathise, from my own history, with Lawrence's compromised and contradictory attitudes to

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<sup>55</sup> The 'blond Bedouin' is Lawrence's biographer Lowell Thomas's phrase characterising his subject (Dawson 1994: 168-9).

class and race – the ambivalence of belonging, and not belonging, or not wanting to belong but still at some level craving, and seeking, acceptance.

So we can see more clearly now why Harry got his withering look for suggesting: ‘You better get into some trousers too’, as well as the significance of the Cairo HQ Guard’s remark, under his breath, as Lawrence and Faraj walked towards the Officers’ mess, before the confrontation: ‘What do you think you look like?’ The film reflected how the ‘real’ Lawrence was described in contemporary sources, for instance by his biographer Lowell Thomas:

I have seen him in the streets of Cairo without belt, and with unpolished boots – negligence next to high treason in the British Army. To my knowledge he was the only British officer in the war who so completely disregarded all the little precisions and military formalities for which the British are famous. Lawrence rarely saluted, and when he did it was simply with a wave of the hand, as though he was saying, ‘Halloa, old man’ to a pal. I have never seen him stand to attention. (Dawson 1994: 175)

There are plenty of instances in *The Sheep* where I exhibit a similar rebellious informality: staying in my pyjamas – that were too big, the sleeves flapping about – while the other boys were already dressed; wearing my uniform untucked, the check shirt with cuffs undone underneath it, no hat; and finally the melodramatic act right at the end of the film, after the desecration of the sheep’s grave by my fellow Scouts, when I tear off my scarf and throw it away: my childish rejection of the sartorial norms of Scouting, and perhaps an attempt to find an equivalent of AK’s officer deciding to go ‘out in the village and dance starko with the natives’ (Slessor 1972: 112).

Of course, as Caton’s remark about Lawrence appearing like a blushing bride in his robes indicates, the issue of anti-militarism is confused with that of gender. Caton’s remark that the ‘fact that Lawrence was represented in this movie as [...]

not conventionally masculine [...] was deeply, if probably also unconsciously, satisfying to me as a teenager' (200) is certainly true for me too, and he goes on to suggest a reading of the film as 'of Lawrence as a woman moving through a malevolent male world' (213), which could also characterise an aspect of my role in *The Sheep*: the 'feminine', feeling boy in a harsh masculine environment.

Indeed, one of the salient features of this chapter so far has been the absence of *actual* women - from both the films, and what I have been saying about them.

This reflects how both Graham Dawson and Jonathan Rutherford talk about the function of gender relations in the imperial project. Dawson describes how '*Seven Pillars* reproduces the structural absence of women, especially Western women, from the world of the legend...' and he characterises Lawrence's adventure as 'quite literally "a flight from domesticity"' (207). Rutherford asserts that 'a central dynamic in the creation of (this) imperial manliness was men's childhood relationships with their mothers.' He also talks about

the effect on men of growing up in a patriarchal family institution in which love and relationships are a scarce resource controlled by mothers and in which fathers are either absent or – emotionally speaking – ineffectual and marginal figures (1997: 7).

Growing up a man in this kind of environment (which I recognise from aspects of my own childhood spent in boarding schools) obviously produces insecurity and ambivalence, which the empire and its various institutions offered a partial escape from – at a price. I'm reminded about how at the end of *Heart of Darkness* Marlow, when he visits Kurtz's fiancée, is unable or unwilling to relate his last words to her ('the horror, the horror') – indicating the unbridgeable gulf between the male colonial world of adventure (and horror), and the domestic interior of women. These flights from domesticity - from women and our mothers - are a defining feature of the various masculinities that the imperial project attempted to create, both in adulthood in service in the armed forces and in imperial service abroad, and are rehearsed in childhood in the practice of

sending boys away to boarding school. In fact *The Sheep* as a whole is clearly my sublimated cry of pain and protest at my being sent away to school.

Success in the imperial adventure as a man necessitated a break from our mothers - and the love and comfort that the world of women promised (if not actually, at least ideally) - a break which British mothers themselves were encouraged by Kipling to make when he exhorted them to 'go bind your sons to exile ...'<sup>56</sup>. It is possible to see these two films as attempts to return from exile to this pre-imperial world: Lawrence tries to re-capture this world or at least find a substitute for it in the desert with his Arabs, and I attempt a return to the body of an ideal mother through the - admittedly slightly bizarre - intermediary of the warm, woolly sheep. In neither case do these attempts end well. Lawrence returns to England feeling he has betrayed the Arabs and their cause, and is now alienated from them and it. And my sheep dies: does my character demonstrate my ambivalence towards the attempted return - or my sense of its impossibility - by allowing it, through my negligence, to be killed on the railway line? Certainly in my role as co-author of the film it seemed to me the appropriate fate for the sheep.

In the final scenes of *Lawrence of Arabia*, Lawrence is being driven away from Damascus, passing a group of Arabs on camel-back, in a shot Caton sees as 'a fearful image of uncertainty and dread' (258). 'Well sir, going home?' asks his driver; but as Graham Dawson points out '... "home" no longer exists for Lawrence' (225) - nor for me at on a smaller, more childish scale when I've buried the sheep and thrown away my Scout's scarf.

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<sup>56</sup> 'Take up the White Man's burden - / Send for the the best ye breed - / Go bind your sons to exile /To serve your captives' need; / To wait in heavy harness, / On fluttered folk and wild - /Your new-caught, sullen peoples, / Half-devil and half-child.' - from *The White Man's Burden*, in Brooks & Faulkner 1996: 307.

### **Conrad:**

One of my earliest memories of my father is driving with him. He liked to go fast, and I enjoyed it too. When he got stuck behind a more cautious driver he would shout impatiently 'bloody empire builder!', which I never fully understood, and he never explained. I understand it now as part of his ambivalence about the British and his adopted nation. He was part of the generation who escaped from Poland to fight alongside the British as the Germans invaded in 1939, and were unable to return because, as many of them saw it, Churchill cynically abandoned them to the Russians in the post-war settlement. Despite this, my father often described England as the most 'civilised' country in Europe, and he often treated his English male friends with something that seemed - uncomfortably to me - like deference. I was embarrassed when he called them 'old boy' in his thick Polish accent. In contrast, he also clearly felt that some aspects of the English class system were absurd, and also applied this ambivalence about class to his own nation: he made jokes about the Katyn massacre<sup>57</sup> being a good thing as it had wiped out the Polish ruling class. He also liked to joke about his East European ethnic heritage – often proudly claiming descent from Genghis Khan (because he had 'mongol eyes'), in a (probably ironic) celebration of the mediaeval invasions of Poland Russia by the 'Asiatic hordes'.

It was the detached, ironic tone that Conrad adopts in *Heart of Darkness*, in particular the way he conveys it through the figure of Marlow, that appealed to me when I first read it as a teenager – as well as my consciousness of Conrad's and my shared Polish origins. As Edward Said comments: 'Never the wholly incorporated and fully acculturated Englishman, Conrad therefore preserved an ironic distance in each of his works' (1993: 27). Marlow is described by the anonymous narrator of *Heart of Darkness* as 'the only one of us who still "followed the sea"' (19) and his distance from his companions on the boat, to whom he is telling the story of Kurtz, is emphasised too in the ways they sometimes become puzzled or irritated by his narrative style: '[...] we knew we

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<sup>57</sup> Stalin's murder of thousands of Polish officers in the Katyn Forest in 1940.

were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences' (1996: 21) - says the narrator, as Marlow begins. Later Marlow makes a joke about his shore-bound companions' working lives when he describes, later that night, navigating the river in the Congo:

"I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for – what is it? Half a crown a tumble -"

"Try to be civil, Marlow," growled a voice, and I knew there was at least one listener awake besides myself' (50).

Finally, after finishing his story, Marlow sits 'apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha' (95). This image of orientalised otherness resonates with Said's perception of Conrad's 'extraordinarily persistent residual sense of his own exilic marginality' (27).

Marlow's ironic distance is present perhaps most forcefully in his descriptions of the operations of Empire he comes across, notably when he travels to the city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre. Prejudice no doubt. I had no difficulty in finding the Company's offices. It was the biggest thing in the town and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an oversea empire, and make no end of coin by trade. (Conrad 1996: 24)

In the light of the brutality and death he is later to encounter in the Congo Marlow's phrase 'Prejudice no doubt' has a distinctly ironic ring. The areas controlled by the Company were indeed 'full of dead men's bones', like the Biblical 'whited sepulchre'. Adam Hothschild has described how King Leopold of Belgium used the profits of his colony to decorate the city of Brussels (not named by Conrad, but clearly implied) with 'Congo-financed extravagance' and how this brings to mind Conrad's description of the unnamed European capital in *Heart of Darkness* as "the sepulchral city". But of the millions of Africans whose labours paid for all this and sent them to sepulchres of unmarked earth, there is no sign (1998: 293-4).

Conrad's ironic sense of the hypocrisy involved in the operation of empire is present throughout the book, but maybe most clearly in the description of the 'Company's chief accountant' at the station in the Congo:

[...] I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing, and had a pen-holder behind his ear. (32)

Less than a page before this, Marlow has encountered a grove near the river populated by the ill and dying black employees of the Company:

'They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now – nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom' (32).

Yet Marlow commends the accountant because 'in the great demoralisation of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone. His starched collars and got up shirt-fronts were achievements of character' (33). When he takes his leave Marlow describes him 'bent over his books [...] making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions: and fifty feet below the doorstep I could see the still tree-tops of the grove of death' (34).

AK too was concerned to keep up appearances, having, as we have seen, 'a great belief in dress as a civilizing tendency': he tells how, in Robari (the outpost in the jungle where he was stationed, where two years before his arrival there had been a massacre of the natives by British troops), he

invariably made a point of dining in a white shirt and collar and clean clothes... It reminded you you were still a civilised being, and as we turned in soon after dinner one shirt lasted four or five nights; which was as well considering they had to be sent 60 miles to be washed...' (Slessor 1972: 113)

Like Marlow/Conrad with the accountant, when I read this I had an amazed respect for AK, alongside a conviction of his absurdity and the hypocrisy of his situation: I felt their hard-won white shirts were certainly 'like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones' (The Gospel According to St Matthew Chapter 23, v. 27).

**Orwell:**

I have a couple of strong memories from the 1960s. In the spring of 1967, before the 'summer of love', I was in the 'Middle Common Room' at my public school, ranting against the (to me) ridiculous, hierarchical system of privileges and punishments that maintained life there. A member of the 'Junior Common Room' was there, listening, and when he left I was rounded on by one of my peers (whose father, I remember, was a senior policeman in the country then known as 'Rhodesia'). He was red in the face, enraged. How dare I talk like that in front of a 'junior', letting the side down? It was all very well for me to have views like that, as long as I didn't make them known to the younger boys<sup>58</sup>. The second memory is from spring 1968. I was in my late teens, being interviewed for a place at Christ Church, Oxford (my 'family College', from AK's time onwards). Across an enormous table covered in green felt – as big and smooth as a bowling green, it seemed to me – sat six or seven old dons, all inspecting me over their glasses, all men, all well into their sixties, and all, of course, white. One of them asked who my favourite author was, and I said George Orwell. I thought I detected muffled disapproval when I gave his politics as one of my reasons for liking him. I was relieved when I wasn't offered a place at the College, and enjoyed my (quite possibly mistaken) feeling that I was a victim of political discrimination.

Both Conrad (by virtue of his Polishness) and Orwell (as an Old Etonian socialist) seem to me to occupy the position of 'inside outsiders' – commenting critically on

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<sup>58</sup> His fury now reminds me of 'the vehemence of the colonizers against any among them who put colonization in jeopardy. It is clear that such a colonizer is nothing but a traitor' (Memmi 2003: 65).

the worlds to which they belong, and in which they are inextricably involved. I recognise that my identification with them as 'outsiders' is complex. From her diasporic position Ien Ang comments how: 'Claiming one's *difference* [her emphasis] (from the mainstream or dominant national culture) and turning it into symbolic capital has become a powerful and attractive strategy among those who have never quite belonged, or who have been made to feel that they do not quite belong in the West' (12). As privileged white European men, Lawrence, Conrad, Orwell and myself have to some extent been able to choose an 'outsider' stance, and also to some extent to continue living on the 'inside'. Nevertheless my attraction to Orwell derived more than anything else from my sense of him - particularly from his essays about Empire - as a 'class traitor', an imperial servant who hated the class- and race-bound roles he was supposed to occupy, but nevertheless to some extent felt enmeshed within them. Paul Gilroy, in his analysis of Orwell's essay '*A Hanging*' talks about how his 'humanistic outlook' is 'directed sharply against the injustice and inequality of the Empire's racial dominion' (Gilroy 2004: 66). The figure that moved me as much as Gilroy in the essay is that of the dog who 'danced and gambolled just out of [...] reach' of the warder, and jumped up and tried to lick the face of the condemned man (Orwell 1936/2003: 24-25).

The intrusion of a stray dog [...] inadvertently humanises the condemned man by refusing to respect the false gravity that Britain's remote government has invested in this exercise of its overarching power (Gilroy 2004: 86)

That sense of animal anarchy and joy, beyond the reach of militaristic rule, is certainly how I envisaged the function of the sheep when we were making *The Sheep*, and how I remember the happiness I experienced as a child with our golden retriever dogs.

Gilroy also commends '*Shooting an Elephant*' for giving a 'strong sense of the absurdity and destructiveness of the Empire and the toll it had taken of the country's moral and humanitarian stock' (2004: 85). For me too, Orwell's account

of his uncertainty in front of the Burmese crowd willing him to shoot the elephant was a key passage:

Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd – seemingly the lead actor of the piece: but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalised figure of a sahib (Orwell 1936/2003: 36).

And then, a few years ago, there I was in Sierra Leone making *A Whited Sepulchre*. Of course, I was a white man with a camera rather than a gun, and so wasn't enmeshed in colonial relations in the same way, or to the same degree, as Orwell. Nevertheless, there is something very familiar to me about that feeling of being 'a hollow, posing dummy'. Albert Memmi, in his description of 'the colonizer who refuses' written over fifty years ago, describes how 'he lives his life under the sign of a contradiction that looms at every step, depriving him of all coherence and all tranquillity' (2003: 64). In Sierra Leone I was trying to refuse the colonial relations within which white filmmakers are normally implicated in Africa, and experienced something of a similar contradiction. The power of the camera in my hands in that situation (even such a tiny camcorder), combined with my status as a white man, afforded me an authority that on a number of occasions I experienced as spurious, shameful and embarrassing. My body felt 'out of place', a key sensation of shame for Elspeth Probyn (2005: 45 & 66). So for me, the look that the malnourished-looking little boy (Fig. 39 – see next page) gives me/my camera at the moment the villagers in Rokel are making me a gift of a sack of vegetables, was the look of someone who sees the emperor has no clothes (although for him I'm sure now it was just a curious glance):



Fig. 39<sup>59</sup>

So how did I end up as a filmmaker travelling in Sierra Leone, looking through my lens at this boy, him returning my gaze?

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<sup>59</sup> See DVD Scene Selection, Chapter 9 for the sequence in which this shot appears.

### 3c) Filmmaking and me

#### 1961-1974:

I described above how my filmmaking life began with a form of autobiography in the making of *The Sheep*. The point here is that the film reflected me and who I was at the time - a kind of lost sheep, uncomfortable with his class background, whose emerging, apparently eccentric path was validated in the film. Moving image and sound became intertwined with my personal trajectory.

My obsession with film continued through adolescence, although not obviously in autobiographical mode. I made a spoof horror short and a pretentious mood piece about city versus country called *Sermons in Stones*, at public school. *If...* by Lindsay Anderson (1968) came out around the time I left the school, and I identified with the hero's anger as he machine-guns staff and parents in the quad. I still thrill to the *Missa Luba* Anderson used on the soundtrack. I was given a place at Brasenose College, Oxford (having been rejected by Christ Church) largely - I think - because the tutor who interviewed me was also a fan of Kubrick's *2001* (1968), which we discussed for over half an hour. I identified with the embryo in the closing shot, gazing at the world anew. I thought then that commercial cinema would never be the same again: conventional narrative would die, poetic visions would proliferate. For me, then and now, the appeal of cinema is about the transformation of the world – an arrangement of indexical signs of 'the real', which through their juxtaposition and creative treatment, prefigure new social, political and cultural possibilities. As Bensmaïa says of Rouch, 'for him, making films [...] is about injecting a dose of the possible into reality. Meaning that, thanks to film, new dimensions of reality become possible' (2007: 82).

At university I made a film with a friend – a (now embarrassing) scream of alienation and rage, based on a simplistic but passionate reading of the theorisation of anality in Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (Brown 1959), in

which a constipated student in a mortarboard sits straining on a lavatory, intercut with scenes from Oxford University life. But it was the films I watched rather than produced that made more of an impact. I saw a lot of 'underground' movies, and remember watching Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (1966) in the early hours of the morning in the basement of the Museum of Modern Art, lying on mattresses, feeling avant-garde but numb with exhaustion. The biggest revelation was the work of Jean-Luc Godard. An art cinema in town put on a festival and I saw 14 of his films in one weekend, including *Pierrot le fou* (1965). The key moment for me, as I watched, was when Ferdinand (Jean-Paul Belmondo) and Marianne (Anna Karina) are filmed from behind, in the car driving to the south of France.

Ferdinand turns round and addresses the camera - then:

Marianne, *also looking round, puzzled*: Who are you speaking to?

Ferdinand: To the audience. (Godard 1969: 55)

I found this reflexive acknowledgment of the cinematic process deeply exciting. My favourite Godard film became *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (1967) - in part an (auto)biographical portrait of his city, Paris, mixed in with a very reflexively told, fictional story, all narrated by Godard in an extraordinarily intimate whisper. As he says himself of the film: 'I watch myself filming, and you hear me thinking aloud' (Godard in Milne 1972: 263).

My favourite sequence features his voice over an ultra-close shot of the surface of a cup of coffee, an intimate, contemplative, point-of-view shot:

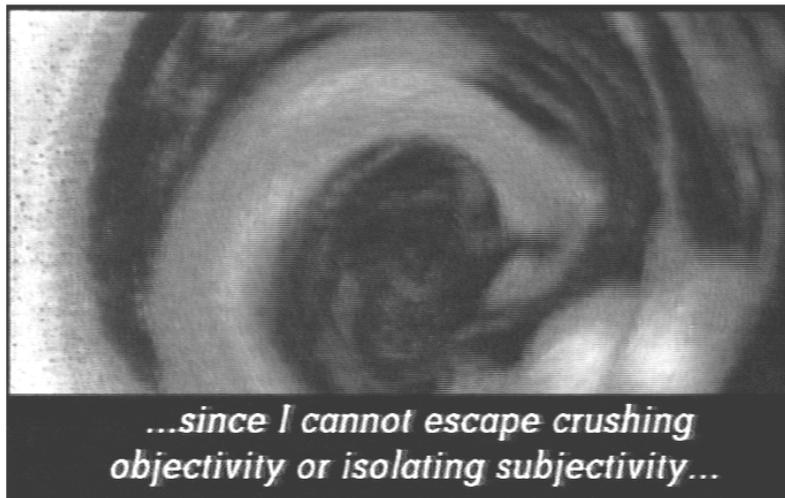


Fig. 40

From 1972 to 1974 (immediately after Oxford) I went to the West Surrey College of Art & Design, to study Film and TV Production. The College had swallowed Guildford School of Art which had exploded with the Slade and others in 1968, and was busy trying to live down its 'revolutionary' reputation by being commercial, market-oriented and 'anti-art' when I arrived. The small number of us on the left avidly consumed samizdat-style papers from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, to counter the College ideology. Mick Jones, a fellow student, and I then started hearing about experimental work (particularly in Canada and the US) involving Sony 'portapaks'— the first portable video production technology, which at the time promised liberation from the exclusive and expensive filmmaking industry and the moribund stranglehold of



Fig. 41: Guildford 1973: trying to get to grips with 16mm film technology. I'm on the extreme left of picture, Mick Jones on the right.

the BBC/ITV duopoly in TV. As Nam June Paik expressed it then: 'Television has been attacking us all our lives, now we can attack it back' (quoted in Elwes 2005: 5). So in the summer of 1973 Mick and I travelled in North America, visiting groups whose work explored the liberating potential of the new technology, including George Stoney's Alternate Media Center in Manhattan, the Videofreex

commune at Maple Tree Farm in upstate New York and the National Film Board's Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle programme in Montreal.

All of it was fascinating to us: community activists, artists, street people, Black groups finding ways of expressing themselves and their previously 'excluded' visions. The work I saw that has stayed with me most vividly were Frank Vitale's *Hitch Hiking Tapes* (1972), made through the National Film Board in 1972. They prefigured a number of the characteristics that have since become commonplace with the availability of small camcorders. He jumped freight-trains with runaway teenagers (and a 40lb portapak) and secretly recorded surrealist conversations with cops attempting to discourage his hitchhiking. Here was material that, even more than Direct Cinema, gave the flavour of 'being there', but not from the viewpoint of a 'fly-on-the-wall' but an engaged participant: Vitale's embodied presence with his portapak (camera wheeling in the air frantically as he jumps the train), and the resulting sense of his subjectivity, his individual authorial vision, was both palpable, and to me very exciting: the opposite of institutionalised filmmaking; a raw, personal stream of moving-image consciousness – as inspiring to me, though in a different way, as Ferdinand's address to the camera in *Pierrot le fou* or Godard's whispering in *2 or 3 Things*.

Later that year a group of us from Guildford were invited to attend a conference in Hull about Godard's work, on the condition we brought some film equipment and recorded the proceedings. A large part of our attraction to the event was that Godard had agreed to attend, but in the event only his partner Jean-Pierre Gorin turned up. However our filmmaking project was doomed for other reasons. The organisers of the conference had, in hindsight, been astonishingly naïve, given the subject and likely participants. The moment we turned on the lights and camera, there were protests, along the lines of 'How do we know you aren't from MI5?' - as well as more sophisticated arguments about representation, our 'right' to record, the impossibility of neutral recording, and so on. We were forced to stop filming. Mick, in an act I have always admired, went upstairs with the

camera and tripod, on his own, and shot off the rest of the roll of (expensive) 16mm film in a confessional, to-camera auto-critique of our presence and role at the conference: a truly reflexive, autobiographical moment.

Mick and I went on to make our Guildford graduation piece – *Breakthrough in Grey Room* – as a Godardian critique of the ideological pressure we had felt we'd been under at the College, leading one of our tutors - to our delight - saying it was the worst television programme he had ever seen. It was later shown at the Video Show at the Serpentine Gallery in 1975 - the first exhibition of its kind in the UK (see next page for our catalogue entry, Fig. 42).

The main conviction I took from my time at Guildford was in the form of a two-pronged critique of the 'mainstream' media and what I thought I should do about it. Firstly, I believed it was a system that actively excluded the vision of certain specific social groups (the 'working class', Trades Unionists, women, minority ethnic groups etc) in the interests of maintaining the status quo. Fighting for 'access' was the way to counter this, along the lines we had encountered in Canada and the US: access to slots on TV, and access to the 'means of production' (skills and equipment, to build up alternative communications capacities), for those 'excluded' groups. Secondly, I thought it was a system that perpetuated various kinds of aesthetic conformity, again in the interests of maintaining the (late-capitalist) status quo. Crudely, we believed that for 'the revolution' to succeed, we were all going to have to learn to see things differently: that is to say, the 'visions of the excluded' suggested aesthetic as well as ideological challenges and ruptures. Radical films needed to be made in a radical way – which was as important, or more so, than to have radical content: to quote Godard, 'The problem is not to make political films, but to make films politically'.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> at [www.donalforeman.com/writing/kramergodardintro.html#\\_ftn2](http://www.donalforeman.com/writing/kramergodardintro.html#_ftn2) (accessed 22/09/09)

**VIDEOTS... Mick Jones, Tony Downumt**  
 Flat 4, 1 Shaa Rd., Acton, London W.3.  
Breakthrough in Grey Room (notes towards an ideology of television). 20 minutes.

Context:-tape produced within/in reaction to/for college course designed to teach the existing production techniques of the mass media, rather than to explore the meaning of those techniques or to search for alternatives.....We started from Godard's conviction that you have to find revolutionary form for revolutionary content... So we tried to explore, as well as what we were doing, how we were doing it.....

# BREAKTHROU

Operation Total Exposure  
 BBC 2 COLOUR

YOU HAVE RULED THIS WORLD LONG ENOUGH!

METHODS OF PRODUCTION CONTROL CONTENT

TV functions as an ideological weapon used by the ruling - owning class to extend the market for the dreams which it sells.

EVERY DAY LIFE:

Minutes to go. Prisoners of the earth come out - With your help we can occupy The Reality Studio and retake their Universe of Fear Death and Monopoly.

SHIFT CO-ORDINATE POINTS

Storm The Studio

The Video Show 1-25 May 1975 Serpentine Gallery London

Fig. 42: our Catalogue page from the Serpentine Video Show

I have two immediate, slightly contradictory, responses to re-examining this two-pronged critique down now: a little embarrassment at my naïvety in the 1970s, and a simultaneous recognition that, in a way, they have been important underlying principles in most of my working life right up to the present.

### **1974-2002:**

Our critique of the media obviously extended to a dissatisfaction with conventional documentary forms. In a Canadian article from around that period Jay Ruby commented:

The documentary film was founded on the western need to explore, document, explain and hence symbolically control the world. It has been what 'we' do to 'them'. The 'them' in this case are usually the poor, the powerless, the disadvantaged and the politically suppressed, and almost always the 'exotic'. The documentary film has not been a place where people explored themselves and their own culture (1978: 7).

Our political and aesthetic opposition to conventional television documentary in the UK in the 1970s was based on a similar analysis, and derived from an opposition to its mode of address – an address well described by Bill Nichols' phrase 'I speak about them to you', characterising the 'three way relationship between filmmaker, subject and audience in documentary' (Nichols 2001: 13). This triangle, for us at the time, indicated how the subjects of conventional documentary – 'them' – are necessarily subject to a reductive process of objectification – of 'othering'. Barthes makes a similar point in his critique of photography, which he felt

transformed subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object [...]. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art (1993: 13).

And later he asserts: 'It is my *political* right to be a subject which I must protect' (15). In television, of course, it isn't so much individual photographers but large

institutions who are implicated in this othering, this abusing of our political rights to be our own subjects. So, for the purposes of this account I also want to modify Nichols' words to describe the tradition of expositional television documentary I grew up with in the UK, which to me was more like 'WE speak about them to you...' - the WE being a kind of institutional version of the 'royal we', delivered typically in the polished patrician tones of the BBC, what, adapting Donna Haraway's phrase, we might call 'the voice of god-trick' (196). Haraway contrasts the 'god-trick' with a 'view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body' - which differs from the god-trick 'view from above, from nowhere ( 195)'. This view in the mainstream television discourse of that time was most easily detected in the conventional commentary voice, which was

in effect, a disembodied voice.[...] It is precisely because the voice is not localizable, because it cannot be yoked to a body, that it is capable of interpreting the image, producing its truth. Disembodied, lacking any specification in space or time, the voice-over is [...] beyond criticism – it censors the questions 'Who is speaking?', 'Where?', 'In what time?', and 'For whom?'

In the history of the documentary, this voice has been for the most part that of the male, and its power resides in the possession of knowledge and in the privileged, unquestioned activity of interpretation. (Doane 1980: 42)

'Community video' developed in the UK out of the North American work that Mick and I had encountered in 1973, and I chose to start seeing myself – along with many others at the time in London - as a 'community video' activist. Our central idea was that people (particularly the socially excluded and mis-represented) should speak for and represent themselves, to express their/our own embodied perspectives, to counter the 'view from above' of mainstream broadcast television, or in Ruby's words make television 'a place where people explored themselves and their own culture' (1978: 7). This exploration was also

encouraged from within UK television by the 'access' work of the BBC's Community Programme Unit (CPU). In its early days the CPU collaborated mainly with community groups to enable them to make programmes: so in that work the address was 'WE speak to you about US'. As I mentioned in Chapter 2d above, the CPU changed to working more with individuals in the early 1990s with the arrival of small, easy-to-use camcorders. They developed the Video Diary form and then the Video Nation series, in which for the first time people from outside television were able to use cameras for themselves, doing their own filming, changing the address again from 'WE speak to you about us' to 'I speak about myself to you', and in the process creating a body of very personal and autobiographical films for broadcast.

All of this work was part of a wider movement (sometimes called 'community arts') in the 1970s and 1980s, that centred on 'the politics of representation': 'who represents who, and in whose interests', as activists in working-class writing and community publishing put it (Morley & Worpole 1982: 63). What was important to all of us at the time was 'allowing people to represent themselves, [...] devising ways by which people, ordinary people can organise and represent themselves' (65). In this kind of community publishing, autobiography became an important form, at an earlier stage than in TV or video:

Autobiography [...] is one means by which people affirm and explore their own lives, their families. Their neighbourhoods – 'making sense of the sense history has made of you' as Sartre put it. Autobiography is both personal and social: it gives writers a chance to reassert the personal identity which our present society falsifies or obscures; while enabling us to place ourselves in a social class and history (Worpole 1978: 245).

I saw portable video as a promising way in which people could be enabled to make sense of their own history - a technique to enable people to explore themselves and their own culture - which contributed to my decision, after leaving Guildford, to follow the 'portapak'/access route rather than the more 'aesthetic'

path of Godard, *Left/Art & Reflexivity*. So I started working in community projects with low-gauge video to enable their access to television, much more than exploring film/video for my own ends. I spent five years working on the Aylesbury Estate in South East London, often wheeling my 'portapak' and playback TV in an old pram onto the estate, to work mainly with groups of young people (Fig. 43). In his 'biography of the white working class', *The Likes of Us* - based on accounts of life in the part of Southwark in which I worked - Michael Collins describes former students like myself who turned to 'community arts', as



Fig.43

rather like the priests of the settlement movement [previous missionaries in the area, who] set out with good intentions. These also operated in local 'garrisons of culture' [...] which they referred to as 'spaces'. Some succeeded in involving the young of their areas in creative activities that might otherwise have passed them by. Others took a heavy handed approach [...] (Collins 2004: 211)

I hope my work fell more into the former category. I was always conscious of the perils of the 'missionary position', as well as of the feeling I was denying part of myself and my own creative needs by following this route. At one time I joined a group with others in the Community/Access sector, initially to explore and overcome the inhibitions to our creativity that we felt we were imposing on ourselves by this way of working, which mostly involved enabling other people's creativity rather than exploring our own.

The 'community video' working path began to close down for me – among many others - with the triumph of Thatcherism, which entailed both a decline in available funding as well as stimulating a need in us to evaluate what we had been doing to see what bits of it - if any - had a meaningful political/cultural

future. I spent most of 1989-93 working on a series of programmes for Channel 4 exploring media/political issues, including *Remote Control* (Dowmunt & Porter 1989) - which argued for access and community TV in the context of the 1989 Broadcasting Act) - and *Tactical TV* and the rest of the *Channels of Resistance* series (Dowmunt & Porter 1993), which together gave an international picture of radical and alternative television projects. The contrast between *Remote Control* and *Tactical TV* is interesting in retrospect. They were made four years or so apart, the second one for a fraction of the money of the first. *Remote Control* (1989) was narrated, professionally and sonorously (a Scottish voice of God) by the actor Bill Paterson, and *Tactical TV* (1993) was an eclectic collage, narrated by Andy Porter (the co-director) and myself, and included shots of us as community video workers in our youths<sup>61</sup>, as a stab at non-authoritarian self-reflexivity.

Through the rest of the 1990s, I grew increasingly disenchanted with the majority of documentary forms on mainstream TV, however much I may have liked individual examples. Apart from some of the work of the BBC's Community Programme Unit I've already referred to - culminating in the video diary genre and *Video Nation* - there were few instances that I could see where the institutional authority of TV documentary and factual programming (their assumed right to speak on behalf of their subjects) was seriously challenged. However 'funky' and superficially different documentaries were, their subjects were (and are) continually misrepresented, mostly cast as 'victims' (and now, more often than not, also victims of increasingly grotesque interventions by programme-makers themselves in 'formatted' documentaries and Reality TV).

Even so, Channel 4 (and BBC2) carried on providing a precarious outlet for the kinds of filmmaking I was interested in during the 1990s - although one which declined steadily throughout the decade. Productions I was involved in that are relevant to my autobiographical theme here included:

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<sup>61</sup> This clip is viewable on the DVD, Extras 4

- *Album* (Dowmunt & Lacey 1996) – a film I produced for Director Gilly Lacey which told the story of a search for the identity of an unknown woman through an old photo album Gilly found – partly depending on a personal journey by Gilly shot in ‘video diary’ style.
- *Girls, Girls, Girls* (Bass et al. 1997) - teenage girls’ video diaries (gathered by the Goldsmiths 4:21 project, exploring the lives of girls from the ages of 4 to 21) edited into three minute slots for Channel 4.
- *Arizona Dreaming* (Dowmunt 1998) – my own ‘video diary’ style journey film about the Navaho lands in Arizona, produced on a horribly tight budget and schedule for late-night Channel 4: but still, an experiment with my own ‘voice’.
- *Slot Art: Identinet* (Dowmunt 2002) - a series of three minute slots for Channel 4, a number of them ‘portraits of artists’, and some which raised issues of visual artists’ self-portraiture, and concerns from them about how they were represented.

My work on *Girls, Girls, Girls* and *Arizona Dreaming* fed directly into the development of *A Whited Sepulchre: Arizona Dreaming* through its exploration of a personal travel diary<sup>62</sup>, and *Girls, Girls, Girls* in particular because of what it taught me about the ‘to-camera piece’ in video diary making, which is therefore worth going into a bit deeper here.

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<sup>62</sup> There’s a three-and-a-half minute clip from *Arizona Dreaming* on the DVD, Extras 5.

**‘Dear camera ...’**

For a paper I wrote a few years after completing the slots (Dowmunt 2001), I interviewed one of the young diarists on the *Girls, Girls, Girls* project. From the moment she was given her camera, Ruth Thorpe was committed to addressing it in a personal and intimate way:

I started off with lots of pieces to camera ... I loved it. I'd just moved out of home, living by myself and everything, and I just kept putting it on all the time ... then rewinding it and watching it back. I thought it was brilliant ... it was a brand new toy.<sup>63</sup>

Ruth's feeling for the camera and the use she wanted to make of it seemed very connected to her awareness of living on her own, and the new-found freedom that went with it. She referred to the camera as:

Something to talk to [laughs] that would never answer back.

[Tony: 'Like a teenage diary?']

Yeah, you could write anything or say anything about your feelings or whatever and no one would ever say "You're not allowed to do that, or you've got to be in by ten" [laughs] ... or any of that really. Whatever you wanted to say or do, wherever you wanted to take it ... it was alright!

A similar feeling of freedom and companionship is present in the sequences that Charmaine Mitchell delivered for the series. In one she is standing alone at her bedroom window, commenting casually on the evening street scene below, in between complaining about how little her job pays, or how racist taxi drivers refuse to pick her and her friends up. On other occasions she personalises the camera, like one morning when she is late for work: 'Morning! It's 7.45 and I'm not dressed yet ... You're probably coming to work with me, see you in a minute!' The sequence then cuts to later when she has dressed, and she approaches the camera to pack it up:

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<sup>63</sup> This and all the subsequent quotations by her are from an interview with Ruth Thorpe conducted by me in April 2001.



Fig. 44<sup>64</sup>

‘.. We’re going to work now. Bye!’

For most of the young women in the series, having the camera with them, as confidante, was an empowering experience. Another diarist, Polly, used the to-camera technique to give her power over an authoritative adult in a very explicit and amusing way. Shortly after passing her driving test, she had a minor accident which she was frightened of confessing to her mother because the car had sustained some damage. She sat in the kitchen at home and told her camera the story of how the crash happened, and about her apprehensions about her mother’s reaction. When her mother comes home, Polly repositions herself to the side of the frame so that she is in the foreground and her mother is at the back of the frame. To Polly’s astonishment, her mother seems remarkably unperturbed by her news and starts asking her questions about a piano they are thinking of buying. Then she leaves the kitchen and Polly leans further into the frame, and, addressing the camera, whispers:

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<sup>64</sup> All the illustrations in this section are frame grabs from *Girls, Girls, Girls*.



Fig. 45

'Strange ..! Why is she talking about the piano when I've just crashed the car?'<sup>65</sup>

This conspiratorial intimacy with the camera is something Jon Dovey is aware of when he points out how the 'to-camera' technique

is the visual equivalent of the actor working downstage in soliloquy to the audience. There is here a particular voice that implicates the individual subjectivities of the mass audience in a different way to the general theatrical address. The actor downstage speaks to every member of the audience individually, the conspiratorial nature of the address bonds us more closely to the speaker. Something very similar occurs with the whispered-to-camcorder close-up - in this separation of foreground and background I am given to understand that as an individual viewer I have been chosen for privileged information which the rest of the scene is not party to. I am being brought much closer, intimately closer, to the diarist and his or her particular subjective experience (Dovey, 2000: 73).

Vicky was another diarist adept at exploiting the intimate and subversive potential of controlling and addressing the camera. At the time of making her diary she worked in a telephone call-centre for a travel organisation, and was often forced to work on the weekends. One Sunday she took her camera into work with her

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<sup>65</sup> See DVD Extras 6 for this sequence.

and set it up in front of her desk, keeping it running for most of the morning. She makes use of the fact that her customers can hear but not see her, while the camera can do both. She complains that her nose is hurting because she's just had it pierced, how she wants to go home to clean it, but can't because she's



Fig. 46

stuck at the call-centre. And when her customers get particularly irritating she mouths silently at the camera: 'Stupid cow ...' or 'Fuck off ...'<sup>66</sup>

**'A true reflection of who I was at the time ...'**<sup>67</sup>

For Ruth, pieces to camera were at the heart of how she conceived of the diary project. She used them as much as a private process of self-exploration as for public consumption, even though she was aware that ultimately they were for an audience:

Mainly I was just doing it for myself ... but I was always aware of the fact that it was going to be watched ... not by the public, I'm not saying I was expecting a million viewers a day or anything ... but I always knew that somebody at some point was going to watch, and I just wanted it to be about me and my life really ... but as true as possible.

However, she sometimes felt that this desire for authenticity was compromised by Channel 4's involvement in the project:

<sup>66</sup> See DVD Extras 7 for this sequence.

<sup>67</sup> Ruth Thorpe's view of her video diaries in her interview with me.

At first I was conscious of it, and the other times I was conscious of it was when I would be out with it and everyone, like my friends, would go “Ooh this is for C4!” or “Don't use this on TV”, or we'd walk into somewhere and they'd all go “Get your camera out, because we all want to be on TV ...” and I just didn't want that at all.

Doing pieces-to-camera became her favourite way of working because she felt she could guarantee authenticity using that technique, in contrast to when she was using the camera in company:

The thing that I didn't like about it was when you'd get it out and everybody would start acting, and I'd just think, “Oh no, I'm going to put it away if you're going to be like that”, because I wanted it all to be real.

Her committed pursuit of this ‘reality’ meant that she took pride in recording herself spontaneously, without forethought or worrying about her appearance. She would turn the camera on

... first thing in the morning, or no make up or hair's not done or whatever ... and I didn't really care. If I thought there was something I wanted to do with it I'd just do it.

In the way that she lived with the camera, she also made sure that she could respond as spontaneously to herself as she would have been able to with a pen and a diary: ‘I'd always have it like, close to hand, half set up anyway, batteries charged, and I knew where everything was ...’, and once she had started, she would allow herself to slip into her own stream of consciousness:

.. it could go on and on and on and I'd just be babbling away and I'd just be thinking “why am I doing this?” ... and then I could switch it off and then I'd think “Oh, I didn't say this” and put it back on and carry on again ...

After recording their tapes the diarists returned the camcorder material to the Goldsmiths 4:21 Project, who copied them on to VHS and returned a copy to the

diarist, normally within a couple of weeks. Ruth's self-consciousness would return only at the point she replayed the results of her work back to her self:

That was ... funny ... really funny. Sometimes I remember watching it back and thinking "Oh I'm never doing that again" or "I'm never going to wear that again ... It was useful ... like I'd see what I had to say and how I thought about things, and how I felt about things, because I was literally talking to the camera about everything.

The ability to talk 'to the camera about everything' that Ruth developed as a diarist led to her recording what for me was one of the most moving pieces-to-camera in the series. It came from her response, as a young black woman, to her viewing on television of a documentary about the Stephen Lawrence case<sup>68</sup>. Its power results directly from the way it was produced, as spontaneous video diary material. The Lawrence case had not had much impact on Ruth before she saw the documentary:

There was loads of hype and there was loads of news, and it was in all the papers and all that stuff ... I'd been following it, and I knew a bit about it - not an awful lot - and then everyone was saying that the programme was going to be on, so I sat down to watch it ... I was on my own and, as I started to watch, it just became really real. When I saw his dad and his dad was crying, it was like, to see a man cry, you know that's a big thing, and it just became that bit more real after watching the programme ..

Because of her keeping the camera always at the ready, Ruth was prepared:

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<sup>68</sup> Stephen Lawrence was a young black man brutally murdered in a racist assault in South London in the early 1990s. His murderers have never been prosecuted and the case caused a public outcry because of the incompetence and apparent indifference of the police.



Fig. 47

I had the camera in my hand, filming the TV - that was towards the end of the programme - for the camera to see what I was seeing, and then after that, my response to what I'd seen ...

Her monologue lasted for about 14 minutes, which we did our best to cut down to 3 minutes without doing too much violence to the flow of what she was saying<sup>69</sup>. For her, the experience of making it was no different from her other pieces to camera: it was just another spontaneous expression of feeling:

I wasn't bothered about anything like what I looked like or anything like that. I was just sitting there and talking like I would have talked to my mum or my friends or anybody about it. But I was just having a conversation with the camera about what I thought about what I'd seen ...

At the same time, I think, the piece exists as a powerful statement about Black British identity and the representation of race in the UK, powerful, maybe, because it subverts some of our expectations about how television texts normally represent these issues. Mark Reid, in an article about *Girls, Girls, Girls*, commented how:

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<sup>69</sup> See DVD Extras 8 for this sequence.

The concept of 'representation' ... involves examining the subjects represented in a text in terms of their belonging to particular groups - characterised by gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age; the extent to which their appearance trades on stereotypical or counter-typical encodings of these groups; and the extent to which these representations serve or counter prominent social values and understandings. In effect, the concept is coloured by the extent to which the subjects are 'representative' of wider social groups, meanings and values (Reid 1999).

For Reid one of the 'weaknesses in this approach' is that

the emphasis on the mediation of meanings is predicated on the existence of a real meaning, a real identity, elsewhere; the idea of individuals as representative (or not) either of groups or of classifications denies those individuals any agency [...] The notion of 'representation' is predicated on the subject represented as 'other', and alien, which has the unfortunate effect of silencing them as agents (ibid).

Reid argues that *Girls, Girls, Girls* does the opposite: it affirms the agency of the diarist in the way that it operates within the video diary form:

First of all, the young women in the programme filmed themselves, and prior to this, selected themselves for filming. To some extent, they are the authors of their own representation; indeed, the term 'representation' itself becomes partially redundant - these are 'presentations' of self, rather than 're-presentations' of prior existing selves. Thus, these young women are not, for themselves, members of groups, defined by their 'girl-ness', 'black or white-ness', or their class membership. They are primarily individuals, rather than representatives (ibid).

Ruth's piece about the Lawrence case is certainly intensely personal – a raw expression of heartfelt anger and grief - which is difficult for the viewer not to respond to at a similarly raw and emotional level. However, I think she is also able to speak as a 'representative' as much as an individual 'agent' at the end of the piece, when she comes to some stark conclusions which have their own logic

because of the power of what has preceded them: 'The state of things in this country is just awful .. There will never be equality for black people in this country .. Never ..'

Looking back, Ruth attributes her passion and lack of inhibition to her age and her relationship with the camera:

It was because I just felt comfortable with the camera. And now for me, 8 years later, I would never say that to somebody that I didn't know. Do you know what I mean? I could talk to my mum or someone that I knew very well about it, but I couldn't just come out with all of that and show much emotion and everything now. I'm 24 years old, whereas then it was just like 'I did it, the camera was there, that was how I felt ...'

When the piece was transmitted she received a range of responses from family and friends:

I got mixed feedback from it. Some people said "It was really great what you had to say, and someone had to say it", and stuff like that. And some people said "[gasp] how could you say that? You went a bit too far" And now I think yeah, I probably did say too much and I said things that could have been damaging to me ... because I work in a school and stuff like that ... I mean it was thoughtless and if I could do it again, then no, I wouldn't have said everything because it was for a public audience ... but for me I wasn't speaking for the camera, I was speaking about how I felt ..

It was the unguarded intimacy of the diary format and the piece-to-camera which, for me, produced the value of the piece, its difference from other more 'public' statements about racism and the Lawrence case. The fact that it was so personal gives it its political value. Despite being conscious herself that her piece was an intensely particular and personal response, Ruth did relate her experience of doing it to a perception about media power, about how communities are excluded

in mainstream discourse. In the diary piece itself she comments on how, at the time, there was more coverage on UK television of the OJ Simpson trial in the US than there was on the Lawrence case, and in her interview with me she said:

When I think about when other things that have happened, like in the media ... you get news, you get information, but you don't get a lot of opinion from ... the black community, or from black people, really ... which is my opinion because I'm black. Probably Chinese, Indian, whatever, everybody would probably say the same thing.

### **2002-2008: *A Whited Sepulchre***

All of the interests and influences outlined above fed into the design and execution of the *Whited Sepulchre* project, at a time when a personal/ autobiographical way of working has become a highly feasible option because of the state of current technology. Individual desktop filmmaking is now a widespread reality. The 'utopian moment' of the video portapak in my youth, with all its contradictions, is back with a vengeance. With a small digital camera, and a computer with an editing package and a DVD burner, anyone with relatively modest resources can become his/her own filmmaking production company, studio, distributor and exhibitor.

I began working on the proposal that led to *A Whited Sepulchre* in 2002, but this was the culmination of a much longer process. I had been trying for at least two decades to find a way of making a film about AK's diaries, including forming it into two proposals - one for Arts funding for an experimental hybrid drama-documentary, the more recent as one programme in a pitch to the BBC for a series of personal documentaries on British imperial history<sup>70</sup>. Finally I made it the centrepiece of my AHRC Fellowship proposal, in its current incarnation as an

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<sup>70</sup> Very much along the lines of Channel 4's *Empire's Children*, discussed above – with significant differences: the 'children of empire' in our series were not celebrities, but filmmakers who were going to direct their own (autobiographical) programmes.

experimental video diary. I'd become drawn to and fascinated by what I saw as the paradox of autobiographical documentary, its seemingly 'unmediated', mirroring directness (in Ruth's words 'a true reflection of who I was at the time ..') alongside its capacity to disturb

the impression of an unmediated flow straight from "reality" to the viewer. No such unmediated (automatic) stream carries the first person film. The filmmaker's subjectivity is not only brought back into the frame, it permanently ruptures the illusion of objectivity so long maintained in documentary practice and reception (Lebow 2008: xii).

### 3d) The mirror and me

#### The 'mirror machine':

As I said in the previous chapter, I was originally attracted to working with video in the early 1970s, when I heard about the experiments with the newly invented video portapak - described by George Stoney in the US as a 'mirror machine' (Stoney 1971: 9). It's hard now to imagine ourselves back in that time, before the mass marketing of camcorders, when the experience of seeing ourselves on the television screen was rare and special, and to remember the particular excitement generated by the first portapaks. This was an excitement both political, in relation to the media at large, but also highly personal in our individual responses to the way the machines worked. For the first time it became possible for all of us to see ourselves on 'television' (up to that moment the almost exclusive preserve of political elites and celebrities) - both 'live' in closed circuit, and played back immediately after recording, on monitors and televisions connected to the portapak. A good way to convey some of this excitement is to quote at some length from *Radical Software*, the 1970s North American journal of this new video movement, which published an article that asked the question: 'Just what is it anyway about the nature of portable video which makes process its most important product?':

Because we are concerned with life as a process, it is only natural that in the act of taping, the foreplay (as well as the afterplay, instant replay) becomes as important as the orgasm itself. Otherwise, the subject becomes an object, and the cameraman (or woman) becomes a video chauvanist [sic] or rip off artist which is most often the case when a big tv or film crew comes into a scene and takes the information and runs. Portable video, because of its nature, has a built-in safeguard against such tendencies. Even if you're not into passing the camera around and letting your subject/object become a participant in the production and seeing how easy and fun the whole media trip really is, you can at least let him (them) (her)

have the experience of seeing himself replayed on a monitor [sic] after the fact, since no one should be denied the realization that he is equal to any superstar the establishment decides to hype up. Anyone who has ever taken his portapak and a portable monitor [sic] into the street and just let the tape roll, knows the power this little machine has in making things happen - i.e., people actually begin talking to you! (which doesn't always occur so easily if you happen to look a little weird to them). They also start talking to each other and in their amusement with seeing themselves and their friends on tv, they begin to develop a consciousness that what they have to say does mean something to someone besides themselves and that maybe, if it isn't too much to hope, they can begin to regain something long ago lost to them in a world of giant corporate power structures, and that is the feeling of having control over their own destiny (Dudley 1972: 55).

Behind these utopian musings is an acute consciousness of the empowering potential of seeing ourselves mirrored back on the film or TV screen. In the same period in the UK, Brian Groombridge<sup>71</sup> saw this as a crucial component of a democratic society – television as a public forum that should be open to all, predicated on the proposition that we don't exist until we have experienced ourselves being represented on television:

We have a sense that we know we exist because there we are on the screen. And if you do not appear, if you or your people do not appear or appear only in certain roles, you are diminished by that (1989).

David Walters was a teenager I worked with in a video group on the Aylesbury estate. He put it in more personal terms in an interview I did with him and the group in the late 1970s: 'Listen, I don't know about you ... when I walked in here, the first time filming, when I saw myself on telly, I was overwhelmed, man ...'<sup>72</sup> (see Fig. 48)

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<sup>71</sup> In the same year as the Radical Software piece, Groombridge wrote a book – *Television and the People* – exploring similar themes from a UK perspective (Groombridge 1972).

<sup>72</sup> We used a clip from this interview in *Tactical TV* - viewable on the DVD, Extras 4.



Fig. 48

Despite the way in which this (apparently validating) mirroring process was facilitated by the (then) new technology of video, the impulse behind it has been there from the beginning of the history of the moving image. It is echoed in the experience of early cinema – for instance in Mitchell and Kenyon’s ‘topicals’ or ‘factory gate films’ in the early 1900s, in which they filmed people leaving work (or promenading along the seafront, or attending public functions like the opening of new tramways). Mitchell and Kenyon then advertised their film shows locally for that night. They included fiction and other previously made work, but their main attraction was the day’s footage, with the unmissable invitation to come and see yourself on the big screen.<sup>73</sup> This impulse - the desire to see oneself - I think also lies at the heart of my autobiographical impulse in filmmaking: an equivalent of pinching myself to make sure I’m not dreaming: I am here, I exist, here’s the visible, physical evidence.

My early experience in the video workshops which I both conducted, and participated in during the 1970s was that people with strong and confident (if sometimes misguided!) self-images were often uncomfortable at the point of playback on the TV screen, whereas people with low self-esteem (like myself at the time) generally seemed to enjoy the experience of seeing ourselves, as though it confirmed our existence. Certainly my surprise and pleasure – even

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<sup>73</sup> See Toulmin et al. 2004. Gibson and Johnson did similar work in Australia in the same period (MacDougall 1998: 98-9).

astonishment - was that I was a person like other people around me: not a negligible ghost, but solid, a presence with a body and a voice. Embodied. It was as if I was using video therapeutically to heal my 'narcissistic wound', finally having my core sense of self seen and reflected back by the mirror machine in a way that I hadn't experienced as a child in my parenting.

A more recent example of the mirroring functions of video technologies is the famous 'JenniCam' experiment, inaugurated in 1996 when an American student, Jennifer Ringley 'first attached a video camera to her computer and began to upload images of her college dormitory room to the Internet' (Burgin 2006: 44). In his account of Ringley's use of the Webcam as mirror, Burgin cites Lacan and Winnicott's deployment of the 'mirror stage' concept - in particular Winnicott's theory that 'when the infant looks at the face of the mother it sees itself only insofar as the mother recognises it' (2006: 48) – and suggests that Jenni successfully uses her Webcam to be recognised, 'noticed and approved of' (49) in a parallel way that we all seek from our mothers<sup>74</sup>.

Not all stories of the video feedback experience are as positive and apparently empowering as mine or Jenni Ringley's, of course. In a discussion of the use of video feedback as a therapy technique, Jerry Rothwell recounts how some women with anorexia were more likely to see their body image negatively than 'normal' viewers:

It seems that far from enabling subjects to gain an objective insight into their own appearance or behaviour, video can embroil them in a complex interplay of emotions and judgements surrounding their self-perception to which, inevitably, they bring their own history (2007: 2).

I'm suggesting that in my case I brought a particular self-perception from my own history which meant that my experience of seeing myself on video was one that

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<sup>74</sup> A similar point has been made about the computer screen for online diarists: 'The screen itself thus plays the part of the Other, of the Ideal Other, because it is, in and of itself, empty and can thus be endowed with a plurality of meanings. It does not demand reciprocity, but only functions as a mirror of the self. And it is through such a mirror that the private self can move beyond the limits imposed by social codes and connect with others in virtual space' (Serfaty 2004: 471).

enabled me to feel 'mirrored' positively, in ways that I hadn't experienced in childhood. This experience re-inforced my interest in working with video in the community early in my career (enabling others to hold up a mirror to themselves), and certainly has been a strong factor, more recently, in my attraction to using video autobiographically (holding up a mirror to myself).

It was also a strong contributory factor to my agreeing to appear as a subject in two TV documentaries - one in the mid 1980s and the other in 2003 - that made use of the work I have done in psychotherapy on my relationship with my mother. The first of these was in a Channel 4 programme – *A Change of Mind* (Pick & Morrison 1986) which was a four part series on the various branches of humanistic psychotherapy. Part of my interest at the time in appearing in the film (in which I was to be shown participating in a therapy group) was also 'professional' - to experience being filmed rather than being the filmmaker, to experience the vulnerability of being a documentary subject, of surrendering my image to the control of another producer and director, to see – to recall Bill Nicholls' phrase - what it would be like to be part of the 'them' that the filmmaker speaks 'about'. In the sequence that appeared in the programme I was working with Jenner Roth – a multi-disciplinary therapist who was using a Gestalt technique to help me explore my distance from my mother, enabling me to scream and cry for her in a way that, at the time, was profound and very moving<sup>75</sup>.

Three memories stand out from this experience. The first is that I remember feeling almost entirely oblivious of the camera during the shoot, after the first few minutes, despite the very exposing nature of what I was doing. Observational filmmakers and proponents of direct cinema often suggest that they are able to capture 'reality', despite the inherent intrusiveness of a film crew, because – particularly in crisis situations – their presence is ignored. My experience seemed

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<sup>75</sup> A clip from this sequence is in *A Whited Sepulchre* (Chapter 8), and the whole eight minute sequence from *A Change of Mind* is also on the DVD Extras 2.

to confirm this: I 'forgot' the camera, partly because of the discreet, unobtrusive observational style of filming, and partly because I was so absorbed in what was happening for me emotionally.<sup>76</sup>

The second memory is how uncomfortable I felt about the way in which my contribution was edited into the finished one-hour programme, which was entitled 'Mothers and Sons', and whose principal 'expert' interviewee was the feminist psychotherapist Susie Orbach. Inevitably my slice of raw experience became an 'example' of more general points Orbach was making about men and their mothers. Although she wasn't saying anything that I felt was particularly untrue about me, I felt misrepresented just by the fact of standing in for others, as a 'representative' of a 'group' or 'classification' in Reid's words from the previous chapter. This is of course a classic way in which documentary uses its 'social actors', and David MacDougall comments on the 'sense of betrayal' this sometimes engenders: 'The person seems devoured by his or her attributes as a "subject", finally becoming no more than the incarnation of them' (1998: 45).

The third memory is my uneasiness and self-questioning about who my audience was for my 'performance', after the film was completed. My mother was still alive in 1986, and I felt I had to warn her about the programme, in case she heard about it from someone else (though I'd guess not many of her circle watched Channel 4 then). But I also speculated at the time - and since - that I was sending a message to her in the film. In the event she seemed relatively unaffected by seeing it - she expressed a lot of anger towards Jenner, whom she saw as torturing me, and great relief that 'your father hadn't seen it - he would have been very upset.' I also, incidentally, had a lot of positive feedback from people who saw the programme, including, most touchingly, from the receptionist at the South London Community Centre where I worked, who had a troubled

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<sup>76</sup> However, I'm also open to the idea that at some level I was aware that I was being filmed, and that I had an unconscious investment in my 'performance'.

relationship with her husband and was grateful to have seen a man exploring his feelings openly in the way I had.

Almost two decades later, in 2003, Jenner Roth was invited to gather a small group of men together to discuss their relationships with their mothers for a Discovery documentary that was to be shown on Mothers Day. I agreed to be part of it because I'd become involved by then in the issue of autobiographical film, and thought it would also contrast interestingly with the Channel 4 piece from the 1980s - which indeed it did. The Discovery piece - entitled *21<sup>st</sup> Century Sons and Mothers* (Tysoe & Shuter: 2003) - featured celebrity interviewees such as Uri Geller, Blake Morrison and Neil Hamilton and commentary by various scientists and experts (including Oliver James), talking, for instance, about brain chemistry and cortisol imbalances apparently caused by unsatisfying encounters with our mothers in early childhood. The tone of the programme was 'scientific' in the style of the BBC's *Horizon* series, and my role in it (along with one or two other 'non-celebrities') was as an example - a kind of laboratory specimen - of a son bio-chemically damaged by the relationship with his mother - complete with snappy graphics of bio-chemical disturbance in the brain<sup>77</sup>.

Though I was much more vulnerable and exposed in *A Change of Mind*, it was interesting to me that my experience of being a subject in it was closer to collaborating with the filmmakers in a film 'speaking about me' (despite the reservations I expressed above), whereas *21<sup>st</sup> Century Sons & Mothers* was more clearly a film 'speaking to you about them'. Although I thought the programme itself was interesting and well put together, as a participant in it I felt more of a sense of betrayal, more objectified, more emphatically one of 'them'. The slower, observational style of *A Change of Mind* gave more screen time to develop a deeper sense of my character and motivation (despite also being an illustration of Orbach's thesis), whereas in the later film I was clearly just one of a large number of building blocks in a fast-paced narrative that was way out of my

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<sup>77</sup> See DVD, Extras 9 for short clips from this programme.

control. These different experiences are partly a reflection of changing styles of documentary on television – from 1980s observational Channel 4, to commentary-led, expository 21<sup>st</sup> century Discovery Channel. There are also more particular issues of production process (and budget). The first film was made by people I knew, who showed us (the subjects) a version of the film in rough-cut for our comments. The second film was made for less than half the budget of the first, and there was no question of our being involved in the edit in any way: we were barely even notified by the production company when the programme was transmitted.

### **Authenticity, reflexivity and ‘experience’:**

[...] how can any representation approximate the self that every self knows itself to be? (MacDougall 1998: 95)

Lurking behind my unease at the way I was represented in these two films (and my valorisation of the ‘mirror machine’ above) is a notion (maybe a hope or expectation) that there are ways that my ‘self’ can be portrayed more or less ‘authentically’ – that I will recognise myself more or less depending on the authenticity or truth of the portrayal; and the implication of my whole project is that, in autobiographical filmmaking (where I am in charge of making the portrait) this authenticity will be maximised. The filmmaker Alisa Lebow recognises the appeal of these notions of authenticity, but feels the need to resist them in her autobiographical work:

I am framed, I have framed myself in a portrait that I recognize simultaneously and contradictorily as a strategic deployment of self for the purposes of this film, and as a “true” and “authentic” projection of my experience of myself. Yet, stubbornly, I maintain that the character on screen, Alisa, is a strategic construction (94).

Despite her contradictory feelings, in the end her attachment to the strategic constructedness of her screen character wins out, because, for her ‘the more we

[Lebow and her co-director] insisted on our authenticity, the more we capitulated to the monadic force, the unitary, univocal, monologic of traditional autobiography', and she sees her main project as a scholar and filmmaker precisely to 'rupture the narrow confines of monologic autobiography' (105). Of course, an important component of this rupturing is to subvert, within the filmmaking process, any notion of the unitary or unified self. However, I am not as convinced as Lebow that the effort to present the/my self 'authentically' necessarily and inevitably leads to a traditionally coherent version of that 'self'. This is not to deny the fundamental truth of Anne McClintock's argument that:

In the history of the West, autobiography is the genre most closely associated with the idea of the potency of self-identity metonymically expressed in the signature; the emblem of a unique, unrepeatable and autonomous identity, created at the stroke of the metaphorical pen(is) (313).

Nevertheless, I still need to acknowledge the many ways in which my experience of seeking 'authenticity' in this project has undermined any residual sense of my impermeable 'coherence' (let alone of any metaphorical phallic power), and has been a process of travel and exploration, rather than of arrival at the certainty of a of a unique, autonomous, or monological identity .

However Lebow's is a widely accepted position amongst writers and filmmakers allied to the 'academy' and to the 'avant-garde', most of whom express a profound unease with autobiographical and diary filmmaking's 'truth claims', despite acknowledging some of its beneficial political uses. For instance Catherine Russell allows that:

Diary filmmaking and the use of autobiographical material are extremely effective and widely used means of "politicizing the personal", and in many ways, the micropolitics of everyday life have become the terrain across which subjectivity is inscribed. And yet autobiography in film and video is rarely a source of truth and authenticity, but a dispersal of representation, subjectivity and cultural history. [... The films'] failure to cohere in an

originary course named “the author” functions as a form of radical ethnography (Russell 1999: xv).

In the list of the kinds of films Lebow rejects and chooses not to deal with in her book she refers to

the artless, sincere, direct-address video that makes no attempt to deconstruct the subject or allow the subjectivity of the film its full range and complexity (2008: xxi).

Lebow’s critique of ‘direct-address’ has a long history, stretching back at least as far as E. Ann Kaplan’s 1983 critique of some early feminist biographical documentaries:

The sort of direct mode of address in both films [*Janie’s Janie* (Ashur 1971) and *Joyce at 34* (Chopra 172)] encourages us to relate the images of Joyce and Janie as “real women”, as if we could know them. Yet in fact, both figures are constructed in the film processes of camera, lighting, sound, editing. They can have no other ontological existence for the spectator than that of representation [...] Underlying all the above is the key notion of the unified self which characterizes pre-semiological thought. Both Joyce and Janie, as subjects, are seen in the autobiographical mode, as having essences that have persisted through time and that reveal growth through individual change outside of influence from social structures, economic relations, or psychoanalytic laws. (Kaplan: 128)

Although it is clear to me (intellectually) that Joyce and Janie in these films are ‘constructed’ and so - at least ‘for the spectator’ ‘have no other ontological existence [...] than that of representation’ (they can’t have, because we experience them only on screen); nevertheless, (emotionally) I now find Kaplan’s dismissal of their ‘ontological existence’ somewhat chilling: they were, in fact, ‘real women’, not only ‘characters’ in a pro-filmic event. I can no more ignore this feeling I have about them, than I could doubt Ruth’s sincerity and integrity as a person, both when she is directly addressing her diary camera, and when she says of her video diary-self portrait (quoted in the last chapter): ‘I wanted it all to

be real' and 'as true as possible'. I will return to the theme of sincerity in the concluding chapter.

The much valorised strategy in the 1970s and 1980s for emphasising the constructedness of media representation, for pursuing the political necessity of finding ways to overcome the 'common-sense' notion of the transparency of film, was reflexivity. We enjoined ourselves to call attention, self-reflexively, to the window/frame so that the audience couldn't look through it without seeing how it inflected and shaped their experience of what they were seeing. In his 1991 discussion of his proposed documentary 'modes' Bill Nichols gives the fourth and last place to the reflexive documentary and comments

In its most paradigmatic form the reflexive documentary prompts the viewer to a heightened consciousness of his or her relations to the text and of the text's problematic relationship to that which it represents (60).

Although he is careful to deny that he is proposing a hierarchy or teleology in these modes, the tone of this definition of the reflexive documentary and its final placing make it hard not to detect some 'favouritism' here.

In 1980 Jay Ruby - the anthropological and documentary filmmaker - was more insistent:

[...] I am partisan. I strongly believe that all serious filmmakers and anthropologists have ethical, aesthetic and scientific obligations to be self-reflexive and self-critical about their work (1980: 153).

He defines 'being reflexive' as meaning that

the producer deliberately, intentionally reveals to his audience the underlying epistemological assumptions which caused him to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, to seek answers to those questions in a particular way, and finally to present his findings in a particular way (1980: 157).

David MacDougall later characterised Ruby's approach as 'external reflexivity' (1998: 88) and countered it with his own concept of "'deep" reflexivity' which

'requires us to read the position of the author in the very construction of the work, whatever the external explanations may be' (1998: 89). A declaration by the filmmaker on its own was inadequate:

To accept the author's description of his or her relationship to the subject is a little like placing a review of police procedures in the hands of the police (89).

For Lucien Taylor, MacDougall's practice of 'deep reflexivity' stems from his observational approach to filmmaking and his complementary recognition that documentary's evocation of a sense of being-in-the-world is itself a form of physical and social engagement with that world, [... so] a documentary also contains an infinity of indications about the epistemological and political forces that constrain its representation. (1998: 18)

These notions of 'deep reflexivity' for me suggest that reflexivity can be, not so much an intellectual practice, more an ontological one, rooted in self-awareness and communicating that self-awareness to others: it is as much somatic and emotional as intellectual, and very much to do with the embodied presence of the person with the camera, in the process of shooting. This is very clearly exemplified in MacDougall's comments on Jean Rouch's famous account of going into a 'ciné-trance' when filming spirit possession:

There is no doubt that filming can induce a trancelike state in which the camera operator feels a profound communion with surrounding people and events and indeed feels possessed by a spirit emanating from them. In these curious ballets, one moves as though directed by other forces, and the use of the camera feels more than anything like playing a musical instrument. (MacDougall 1998: 113)

This has certainly, on occasion, been my experience, and it interests me very much in relation to autobiographical filmmaking styles. For instance, this 'profound communion' or 'sense of being-in-the-world' can be as much (and

sometimes more) evident in an 'artless' or direct-address film (or to-camera video diary piece) as in a more 'sophisticated', traditionally self-reflexive work. As Ross McElwee puts it in relation to his own practice:

Suddenly you see the filmmaker addressing the camera, and you're forced, if it's working correctly, to question not only what he's doing, but what you're doing as an audience member, and I like that (Lucia 1994: 34).

However, Ruby is at pains to make a crucial division between reflexivity and autobiography:

In an autobiographical work, although the producer – the self - is the center of the work, he can be unselfconscious in the presentation of the autobiography. [...] To be reflexive is not only to be self-conscious but to be sufficiently self-conscious to know what aspects of the self must be revealed to the audience to understand the process employed [...] (1980: 156)

In a later re-working of his 1980 essay he adds:

This knowledge - that is, knowing how much of the self it is necessary to reveal - is the most difficult aspect of being reflexive. When successfully mastered, it separates self-indulgence from revelation (2000: 155).

Although I agree with the importance of knowing how much of the self to reveal, I have become used in this research project to flinch defensively when I hear or read the (mostly pejoratively used) phrase 'self-indulgence'. Understood literally, I can't see what the problem is: of course all work in the autobiographical mode has of necessity to indulge<sup>78</sup> the 'self' – where else is it going to spring from? Furthermore it's difficult to separate self-indulgence from revelation in autobiographical writing as its 'revelations' mostly derive from revealing the self. I would suggest that the frequent use of the phrase (to discipline ourselves and

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<sup>78</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary (2001) distinguishes between the pejorative use of the word ('To treat (a person) with such favour, kindness and complaisance as he [sic] has no claim to but desires or likes; to gratify [...] by absence of restraint or strictness ..') and the less loaded: 'To gratify (a desire or inclination); to give free course to, give way to, yield to, give oneself up to ..'

others) has more to do with deep and puritan 'self'-denying norms in our culture, than it does with a clear-headed critique of differing autobiographical impulses and styles. As we've seen before, no less a figure than Chris Marker has defended the self-indulgence of 'making films in communion with oneself' in this way: 'Contrary to what people say, using the first-person in films tends to be a sign of humility: "all I have to offer is myself.'" (Darke 2003)

For me this humility is often powerfully present in 'the artless, sincere, direct-address' video diary style (for example, as in the discussion of video diaries above in Chapters 2d and 3c). I want to argue that there is often, in fact, something inherently 'self-reflexive' in both looking at and directly addressing the camera – as we've seen Jean-Paul Belmondo doing in the 1960s in Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1975). In *Sunless* (1983) Chris Marker criticises the conventional prohibition against looking at the camera in a sequence shot on the jetty on Fogo, one of the Cape Verde islands, in which many of the people he is filming are returning his camera's gaze. The narrator reports how Krasna (Marker's alter ego in the film) asked her: 'Have you ever heard of anything stupider than to say, as they teach in film schools, *not* to look at the camera?' This sequence immediately follows another, shot in a Japanese bar, in which, as Krasna describes how people in this place 'can stare at each other with equality', there is a freeze frame on an old man looking directly at the camera. In this bar, Krasna remarks, 'everyone's as good as the other and knows it'. As Klaver points out

The returned gaze, then, is one of the most powerful looks operating in the media culture. It opposes the viability of the spectatorial gaze by uncovering the relations of performance (2003: 286).

This gaze - of the subject straight through the camera lens to the viewer, is of course endemic in the 'direct address' video diary form - both in the 'piece to-camera' technique and when the autobiographical filmmaker films other people - because they tend to look back at the camera/filmmaker. In this way direct address also

disrupts the filmic spectator constructed by suturing, because it interrupts the seamless spectatorial gaze, fractures identification and the illusion of whole selfhood, and collapses the rigid division between spectator and spectacle (Klaver 288).

The frame cannot be a transparent window on the world for the spectator if people are gazing back at him/her through it. This has the potential of disrupting, besides the 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1975), most other spectatorial power relationships. As Richard Dyer comments:

Looking and being looked at reproduce racial power relations [...] whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen (1997: 45).

In my own exploration of the confessional video diary I have tried to show myself as particular, situated and vulnerable - rather than the objective 'monarch-of-all-I-survey'. So I maintain that the piece to camera - the autobiographical filmmaker offering him/herself up to the viewer - can be disruptive of dominant spectatorial relations, and so visibly reflexive.

However, as we've seen (in Chapter 2c), for Trinh T. Minh-Ha it is mistaken to 'think that it suffices to show oneself at work on the screen, or to point to one's role once in a while in the film' (1991: 77) to achieve reflexivity. Similarly to MacDougall, she refers to the concrete details of her filmmaking practice:

The exploratory movements of the camera ... [do] not result from an (avant-garde) anti-aesthetic stance, but occur, in my context, as a form of reflexive body writing. Its erratic and unassuming moves materialise those of the filming subject caught in a situation of trial, where the desire to capture on celluloid grows in a state of non-knowingness and with the understanding that no reality can be 'captured' without trans-forming. (Minh-Ha 1992: 115)

Egan comments on the way the two autobiographical filmmakers of *Silverlake Life* (Friedman & Joslin 1993) also manifest 'a form of reflexive body writing':

Both Lane & Joslin, furthermore, with handheld cameras, or with the camera attached to the interior of a moving car and swinging through random shots, suggest a contingency in the very filming that dissociates even the autobiographer himself from any controlling vision [...] Both try to abnegate authority and control, [...] but for both of them the camera seems to function as an extension of the body, as a source of experience rather than design (1994: 607-8).

However, despite these similar descriptions on the page, the experiences of watching *Silverlake Life* and Minh-Ha's work remain completely different, and the difference, for me, is in the presence (or in Minh-Ha's case, absence) of the filmmaker in the film. *Silverlake Life* is in fact, in many ways a simple, direct address video made by two people with AIDS, one of the early films to address this topic - and this activist impulse has a bearing on the chosen form of address.

Alexandra Juhasz - an AIDS activist and filmmaker - points out that

[...] a large number of alternative tapes about AIDS by women document, celebrate and affirm, in the dreaded "autobiographical mode", the words and experiences of the makers and those who then identify with them (1999: 207)

Her essay 'They said we were trying to show reality, all I want to show is my video ..' is a riposte to E. Ann Kaplan's 'rejection of cinéma vérité practices of the first generation of feminist documentary film' and a defence of 'realist strategies' from the point of view of an activist, suggesting that 'feminist realist documentaries focus attention on the *condition of constructing collective identity through representation*' [her italics] (204). Juhasz is happy to have women with AIDS make use of 'direct address' to their audience:

Where many critics have seen "naïve realism", I see and make videos that utilize a variety of "realist" techniques with a variety of effects, only one of which is the dreaded psychoanalytic grip of "identification" (1999: 193).

As she points out, the key issue is who is doing the direct-addressing and what they are talking about:

Realist codes and talking-head conventions are most typically used to do the political work of entering new opinions, new subjectivities, or newly understood identities into public discourse (203).

She also argues, echoing a number of opinions on women's identity and authorship we have already encountered, that:

People who are oppressed because of their identities, essential or culturally constructed, do not have the luxury of celebrating the end of identity (212).

As he struggled with his own legacy of complex ethnicities, Barack Obama realised that 'I had spent much of my life [...] in the hope of extracting some granite slab of truth upon which my unborn children can firmly stand' (2007: xvi). I want to suggest that this search for a solidity in our sense of our identity may resonate for all of us, however privileged, or at least for those of us, like me, who occupy privileged class, gender and ethnic subject positions but are uncomfortable with the identities that come with these positions.

In my view, a great deal of the insistence on reflexivity, and the (to me) too easy dismissal of the 'ontological existence' of the subjects of media representation, reveals a distrust of human experience, and a denial of the hope that that it is communicable through film. 'Experience' is, of course, another category that has come under fire from many scholars, notably Joan W. Scott who argues that it 'establishes a realm of reality outside of discourse' (1992: 32), and counters this by insisting 'on the discursive nature of "experience" [her quotation marks] and on the politics of its construction' (37). Although directed at conventional historiography, her argument is also a vigorous challenge to the political viability of the more referential forms of autobiographical filmmaking, in the way that she critiques 'a referential notion of evidence which denies that it is anything but a reflection of the real':

When the evidence offered is the evidence of "experience", the claim for referentiality is further buttressed – what could be truer, after all, than a subject's account of what he or she has lived through? [...] Questions

about the constructed nature of experience, [...] about how one's vision is structured - about language (or discourse) and history - are left aside (24-25).

To counter this 'leaving aside', Scott insists that

we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced (25-26).

She is aware that this picture of how 'historical processes' position subjects has a whiff of determinism about it, so she is keen to point out that, nevertheless

subjects have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them. [...] These conditions enable choices, though they are not unlimited. Subjects are constituted discursively, experience is a linguistic event (it doesn't happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning (34).

I am troubled, from my own experience as a documentary filmmaker, by this emphasis on experience as a linguistic event, and on the discursive constitution of subjects. Although 'subjects' is a commonly used term for the people who appear in documentary films, the way that Scott (and many others) use it in their writing - in opposition to the despised 'individual' - does not chime with how I see (and 'experience') characters in many of the documentary films I like and value - and it certainly does not describe how I would like to be seen as the subject of my own autobiographical filmmaking. Although I know (intellectually) that when I watch a documentary film, the characters can have no other 'ontological existence' for me in the audience, than that presented in the language and

discourse of the film, my (emotional) experience of spending time with them is different. These people may be analysable as 'subjects', but I know them to be, react to them, and experience them on screen as 'individuals', as people who are neither wholly produced by historical processes nor reducible to discourse, and do indeed exist independently of the film.

In the end it's clear that not everything is reducible to discourse, as is implied Terry Eagleton's assault on what he calls 'culturalism' – 'the form of reductionism that sees everything in cultural terms, as economism sees everything in economic terms' (2004: 162). There are areas of our human, corporeal experience that exist both inside and outside language and discourse, death - the subject of the next chapter - being one of them:

Culturalism is of course right that a natural event like death can be signified in a myriad cultural styles. But we die anyway. Death represents Nature's final victory over culture. The fact that it is culturally signified does not stop it from being a non-contingent part of our creaturely nature (162-3).

### 3e) Death, whiteness, existence and me

The awareness of death that defines human nature is inseparable from – indeed it rises from – our awareness that we are not self-authored, that we follow in the footsteps of the dead. [...] Whether we are conscious of it or not we do the will of our ancestors: [...] we submit to their dictates even when we rebel against them. [...] We inherit their obsessions; assume their burdens; carry on their causes; [...] and very often we die trying to vindicate their humiliations. (Harrison 2003: ix-x)

What compels a filmmaker or videomaker to create an autobiographical work? .. a desire to understand my life in relation to larger cultural forces, as well as a yearning for a presence in the world. (Citron 1999b: 280)

*Edward Blyden*: I don't believe in autobiographies. From the days of my mother, my grandmother and my mother, they would refer to autobiographies as .. people wanting to, they have to because nobody knows they exist [laughs]. That's why you write autobiographies ..

*Tony*: To prove you exist?

*Blyden*: Absolutely, absolutely.<sup>79</sup>

The theme of whiteness and death takes many forms. Whites often seem to have a special relationship with death, to yearn for it but also to bring it to others. (Dyer 1997: 208)

It seems melodramatic to say, but it remains true, that (like AK) I was lucky to get out of Sierra Leone alive. As a filmmaker I have to admit that there's a cynical part of me that celebrates this close escape, because it helped me construct the 'narrative arc' of the film. However, as a human being it obviously terrified me at the time, and has left me with a nagging question: why did I put myself in this potentially dangerous situation in the first place? I did have misgivings about going to a poverty-stricken country only a few years after a bloody civil war (and less than two years after I'd had major heart surgery), but I ignored my doubts: why, and what were the 'larger cultural forces' behind my particular decision? Had I assumed AK's burdens, inherited his obsessions, in an effort to prove that I existed?

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<sup>79</sup> The final spoken words from *A Whited Sepulchre*. See DVD Scene Selection, 17.

Most of the answers to these questions are of course intensely personal and particular to me. They have, I hope, been at least partially hinted at in some of the previous chapters. I still feel some shock and shame that I was so able and willing to take the risks involved in travelling to Sierra Leone, as I wasn't a young, childless and unmarried man like AK when I went. I had a partner with whom I've lived for 15 years, and a teenage daughter. Neither of them would have wanted me not to go for their sakes, of course, but my concern here is that I undertook the adventure – 'bound myself to exile' – without thinking or talking it through with them in mind, without really taking my dependency on them, and theirs on me, into account. In that sense I interpret my trip as in some way an unconscious 'flight from domesticity' in a parallel way to Lawrence's as described by Dawson above (1994: 207). In addition to this, I have to acknowledge a certain recklessness in my decision to go. The fact that I would fall over with such disastrous results was almost entirely unpredictable, of course: but I was fully aware that I was more medically vulnerable than I had been before my heart operation, and I remember acknowledging, then quickly discounting, my fears before my departure for Africa. I readily took up the 'white man's burden' and dared to travel to the 'white man's grave', following in the footsteps of the dead.

I now think part of my motivation derived from the dual impulse to make autobiographical films described in Citron's analysis at the top of this chapter - 'a desire to understand my life in relation to larger cultural forces, as well as a yearning for a presence in the world' - and maybe more of the latter, the yearning for 'presence'. That is why Edward Blyden caught my attention in the interview I did with him in Sierra Leone, when he described autobiography as something you have to do because otherwise nobody will know you exist<sup>80</sup>. My obsession

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<sup>80</sup> In the interview I used at the end of *A Whited Sepulchre* (DVD Scene Selection, 17). He had no use for autobiography, because he felt secure in his own achievements and those of his family. Ironically It is an irony that I feel no such security, despite coming from the privileged side of the colonial divide.

with making *A Whited Sepulchre* was in some way a return to my early experimenting with the video portapak 'mirror machine' – another way of convincing myself that I had 'a presence in the world'.

Here I also want to acknowledge again how my project in some ways has mirrored the colonial and imperial relations that, for instance, shaped AK's time in Africa. The white imperial project has been inextricably involved with death and sacrifice (both of whites themselves and, numerically much more significantly, those they have ruled over). The white man's burden often led to the white man's (as well as the black man's) grave (or sepulchre), yet this progression was celebrated in the culture. Richard Dyer attempts to explain the 'white association with death' as 'the logical outcome of the way in which whites have had power' (1997: 208). White supremacy is based on the 'equation of being white with being human' which 'secures a position of power' (1997: 9). However, this then denies white people the vitality that comes from particularity:

White people have a colour, but it is a colour that also signifies the absence of colour, itself a characteristic of life and presence [...] To be positioned as an overseeing subject without properties may lead one to wonder if one is a subject at all [...] Where does this leave the white body which is the vehicle for the reproduction of whiteness, of white power and possession, here on earth? (207)

Dyer suggests that the price of maintaining whiteness as the universal norm is a kind of death – maybe here on earth we already have a foot in our 'white man's grave'. We secure our position of power in exchange for being alive and human in our particular bodies – giving up our embodied 'presence in the world'.

This is also why, I would guess, Paul Gilroy emphasises the importance of the corporeal as an antidote to the injustice of empire, for instance in his description of how, in *'The Hanging'*,

at the critical moment, Orwell turned inward on the body. He moves inside it to consider the functioning of the prisoner's organs, his bowels, skin,

nails, and unimpaired sensorium. This vital humanity, which can only be realized in the overthrow of injustice, directs attention [...] toward the “bestial floor” of human being in the body, in particular to ordinary experiences of sickness and suffering. (2004: 87)

His words bring to mind for me the experience of being gravely ill in my last few days in Freetown, which changed my relationships with the Africans around me in ways I found both surprising and very moving. In the hotel I was in before being taken to hospital, almost all the staff visited me in my room to say how sorry they were I was ill: the night porter’s compassion in particular has remained with me, partly because he was ill himself (although still on duty), sweaty and shivering with malaria, as he wished me a speedy recovery. A few days later, as I was lying on a stretcher outside the hospital, waiting for the ambulance that would take me to the airport and my flight home, the hospital director led his doctors and nursing staff in a prayer for my safe journey, holding hands in a circle around me on my stretcher.

In telling this story I’m aware of the dangers of what Richard Dyer calls ‘me-too-ism’: ‘simply the desire to have attention paid to one, which for whites is really only the wish to have all the attention once again’ (1997: 10). I remain conscious that my suffering ended with a very expensive medical rescue and flight home paid for by my insurance company, and that no such exit strategies exist for the majority of Sierra Leoneans, many of whom were and are in worse health, and in more mortal danger on a daily basis than I ever was. Nevertheless I also remain profoundly touched by the compassion I was shown, and directed by it to a sense of how we all occupy the “bestial floor” of human being in the body’; and my reason for writing about it here is a conviction about the political significance of our shared ‘predicament of fundamentally fragile, corporeal existence’ in fighting the racism and divisive power relations of empire:

[...] the recurrence of pain, disease, humiliation and loss of dignity [...] can all contribute to an abstract sense of human solidarity powerful enough to

make solidarities based on cultural particularity appear suddenly trivial.  
(Gilroy 2000: 17)

For me, as for Albert Memmi

oppression is the greatest calamity of humanity. It diverts and pollutes the best energies of man – of oppressed and oppressor alike. For if colonization destroys the colonized, it also rots the colonizer (2003: 13).

Hartsock has commented on how, in his writing, 'Memmi describes the bond that creates both the colonizer and the colonized as one which destroys both parties, though in different ways' (1987: 191). I can now see my illness, and the compassionate response to it that I enjoyed from the Sierra Leoneans around me, as a small and specific way we found to begin dissolving the 'bond' that Hartsock and Memmi both describe.

Of course, what I also have to acknowledge is that I also share 'the "bestial floor" of human being in the body' (Gilroy 2004: 87) with AK, and so this project has made a bond of compassion - if not identification - between us. This bond has been strengthened by the frequently recurring instances of brushes with death that have haunted both this text, AK's diaries and the film *A Whited Sepulchre*<sup>81</sup>. For me these include the death of my mother and father (leading to me inheriting the family photos), and my own 'near-death experience' in Sierra Leone. Sid Templer (the teacher with whom I made *The Sheep*), as well as Alethea Hayter and John Slessor (two of my relatives I interviewed for the film), all died while I was working on this project. More frivolously, there's also the death of the sheep in *The Sheep*. For AK, there was the death of his mother (which remained unspoken about in his diaries), and the six bouts of life-threatening fever he suffered in Africa, as well as his bout of yellow fever in Jamaica, and the decimation of his fellow officers in his regiment in Africa. At one point in the diaries he comments on the latter, with curt irony: 'I'm now tenth senior here, having been at one time twenty first. It's a nice country' (Slessor 1972: 54). He

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<sup>81</sup> I'm grateful to Sara Ahmed for making this 'haunting' clearer to me.

maintains this phlegmatic attitude almost right to the end of his diaries, when on the voyage home, his dog dies, as I quote him in the film:

A night of real sorrow. Poor Jemmy, the merriest, most cheerful, companionable and altogether best beloved dog I ever had, came to his melancholy end. It always makes me choke now to think of it. After having been with me everywhere up in the Bush and shared my adventures there [...] to be miserably thrown overboard at sea within a week of home.<sup>82</sup>

In fact, the diary entry from which these sentences are extracted goes on for more than two pages<sup>83</sup>. It is the most clear and explicit expression of grief that I have found in all his writing, despite the innumerable human deaths he witnessed. I think I understand some of his response from my own childhood, my own affection for the dogs I grew up with (so much easier to love, and feel loved by, than remote adults), and my own melodramatic mourning for the sheep in the film. Part of the 'bestial floor' that AK and I share is our attachment to our bestial others, our dogs.

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<sup>82</sup> See DVD Scene Selection, Chapter 17, for the sequence in which this quote appears.

<sup>83</sup> Open DVD on a computer and go to PDF 37 to see the whole two pages.

# **Part 4:**

# **Conclusion**

## 4) Conclusion: filming our ‘necessarily real’ selves

‘Reality’ must be ‘reclaimed’ in two senses. First, the concept must be reclaimed from philosophical ideologies which have usurped or denied it – reclamation in the sense of lost property. Second, reality itself must be rescued from the effects of those ideologies that have, like stagnant or muddy water, covered it up – reclamation in the sense of land reclamation. What should be done with reality once it is reclaimed? It should, I suggest, be used, nurtured and valued in an ecologically sustainable and humane way for human emancipation, happiness and flourishing (Bhaskar 1991: 144).

As we experience ourselves as more and more unstable, chaotic and contradictory, as we experience a public sphere that holds no comfort, so our communicative acts depend on the performance of more and more open, individual, ‘authentic’ versions of self (Dovey 2000: 53-4).

The one thing I would say about *cinéma vérité* is that it would be better to call it cinema-sincerity, if you like. That is, that you ask the audience to have confidence in the evidence, to say to the audience, ‘This is what I saw. I didn’t fake it, this is what happened. [...] I looked at what happened with my subjective eye and this is what I believe took place. (Jean Rouch, quoted in Macdonald & Cousins 1996: 265)

Documentary’s central project has always involved ‘claiming the real’<sup>84</sup>, and asserting its relationship with recording, and interpreting, ‘reality’. As Ian Christie points out: ‘The “real” is to documentary as God is to theology: if it’s not there it doesn’t exist’<sup>85</sup>, and Paul Ward notes that ‘the *only* unchanging thing about documentary is that it is a form that makes assertions or *truth* claims about the *real* world or people in that world’ (my emphases - 2005: 8). So it would seem that for documentary to exist, and to continue to exist and develop, we need to insist on and argue for its relationship to the ‘real world’, and to think through the continuing relevance of its ‘truth claim’, which forms the basis of this relationship. This, I would argue, is as important in the field of autobiographical documentary

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<sup>84</sup> The title of both of Brian Winston’s studies on the Grierson legacy in documentary (1995 & 2008).

<sup>85</sup> Concluding remarks at the Documentary Now! conference, 11 October 2008, Birkbeck College.

as for any other branch of the form: perhaps even more so, because of - or, perhaps more accurately, in the face of - the challenging positions I have examined in previous chapters which question the coherence and authenticity of the self, and which stress its performative and fragmented artificiality.



Fig. 49

I interpret this self-portrait by Gillian Wearing as a witty comment on both the difficulty, and the inescapability of notions of truth and authenticity in photographically-based autobiographical work: the smooth surface of her mask speaks of the artificiality of the performance of her self for the photograph, but the 'real' eyes peeking out of the holes in the mask at the same time suggest the authenticity of live flesh, of agency and subjectivity behind the 'made-up'

appearance. Of course her eyes in the picture are no more her 'real' eyes than Magritte's pipe is a 'real' pipe, as his caption asserts:



Fig. 50

Wearing's eyes in her picture, as much as Magritte's pipe, are an image, a representation, not the 'real' thing, but, crucially, because they are photographed, they affect us differently than other forms of image-based representation (for instance, the glossy surface of Magritte's painting). Their 'realness' and authenticity offer a counterweight to the mask – a testimony of human presence. Other artists use photography in ways that seem to contradict this, for instance:

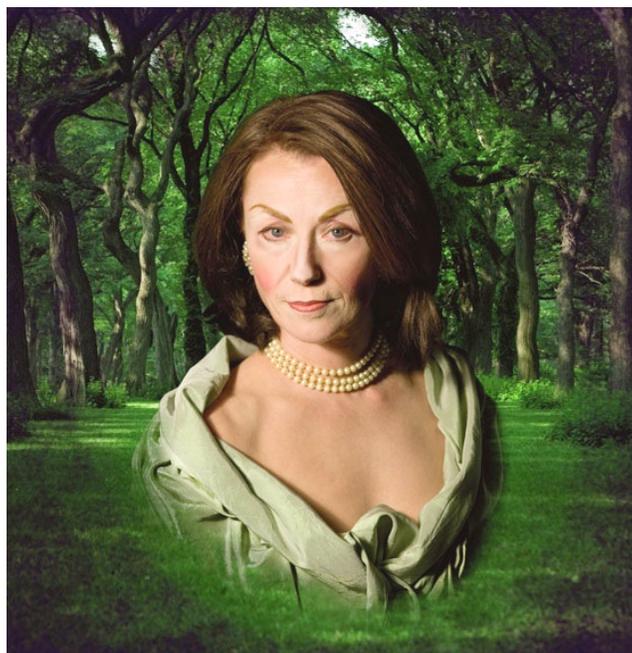


Fig. 51: a recent 'self-portrait' by Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman, whose work as a whole has been a series of performances, using her own body to explore a range of characters and media constructions or stereotypes. However, her own 'real' presence in these pictures, our knowledge as viewers that, whatever the degree of artificiality in the image, they also have traces of her own 'real' body, lies at the heart of their fascination and effectiveness. Sherman was really there, too, in a way she wouldn't have been, or at least that would have been substantially different, if these images were painted rather than photographed.

This substantial difference has clearly been transformed – and some would argue, nullified – by the recent absorption of virtually all image production into the digital domain. Brian Winston has written that

Digitalisation destroys the photographic image as evidence of anything except the process of digitalisation. The physicality of the plastic material represented in any photographic image can longer be guaranteed. For documentary to survive the widespread diffusion of such technology depends on removing its claim on the real (1995: 259).

Of course the photograph's capacity to be manipulated clearly pre-dates the advent of digital technology<sup>86</sup>, and the 'physicality' of many documentary film images has itself never been beyond question. As early as 1898 Smith and Blackton recreated an entire sea battle (and passed it off as actuality footage) with a delightful arrangement of cardboard cut-out boats floating on an inch-deep ocean, with tiny gunpowder charges and an office boy blowing cigar smoke over the tabletop set (Dovey 2000: 5-6).

Nevertheless, something unique always happens to us as viewers when we see the products of a camera that

points at a world most people persist in believing is in some way real. The camera can, and inevitably *must* [original emphasis] 'lie' – but the world is 'out there' none-the-less (Winston 1995: 253)

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<sup>86</sup> To give just one example of still photography from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: the 'Cottingley Fairies' photographs which apparently showed two young girls with fairies. 'Taken' in 1917 they were widely believed to be genuine, by, among others, Arthur Conan Doyle (1922).

Marianne Hirsch talks about her experience of this 'out-thereeness' - the unavoidable presence of the real world in front of the camera - in this way:

As much as I remind myself that photographs are as essentially constructed as any other representational form, that every part of the image can be manipulated and even fabricated, especially with evermore sophisticated digital technologies, I return to Barthes's basic "ça a été" ("this has been") and an unassailable belief in reference and a notion of truth in the picture. (Hirsch 1997: 6)

The sense of 'this has been' derives from the unique relationship to the referent that photographs have, as indexical signs. Barthes reminds us:

[...] photography's Referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call the "photographic referent" not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or sign refers, but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph (Barthes 1993: 76 - original emphases).

For Barthes this is particularly significant in relation to photographs of people, to portraiture: 'The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here' (80). The essay *Camera Lucida*, where Barthes elaborated these ideas, is widely seen as a very autobiographical text - prompted in part by the recent death of his mother - in which much of his theorising about photography hinges on the work of mourning he was involved in: 'The Roland Barthes of *Camera Lucida* is the grieving son who has turned his back on the sociology of signs - because this offers him neither comfort nor understanding' (Jordan 2008: 153).

Paul Eakin also points out how:

When the austere tenets of poststructuralist theory about the subject come into conflict with the urgent demands of private experience, Barthes turned for solace [...] to photography, which he regarded as the supremely referential art (Eakin 1992: 4).

In his previous experiment in autobiography - *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* - Barthes described himself as 'speaking about my self in the manner of a Brechtian actor who must distance his character: "show" rather than incarnate him' (1977: 168). Eakin contrasts this first book - 'recognized by some as the quintessential postmodernist autobiography (or "anti-autobiography")' - with Barthes' later writing in *Camera Lucida* which 'may seem, in its own way, to be a second autobiography, espousing assumptions about the self and reference of a much more traditional sort' (Eakin 1992: 20).

These more 'traditional' assumptions yoke together Hirsch's 'unassailable belief in reference' in the photographic image, with ideas about our representations of each other, of our 'selves', in ways that are important to my understanding of photographically-based autobiography. I am remembering Eakin referring to the question that has 'haunted me for a long time: why should it make a difference to me that autobiographies are presumably based in biographical fact?' (1992: 29), because of how it resonates so clearly with the issue of the continuing significance of documentary's truth claim. I frequently ask myself why I am uneasy about the apparent lack of concern in some postmodern thought as to whether documentaries are fictional or factual. Given that I'm almost convinced, (intellectually) that representation is all important, that nothing I (or anyone else) think, feel or experience, exists outside 'discourse', why should it make such a big (emotional) difference to me that documentaries are presumably based in fact, that documentary footage is authentic 'actuality'? Or, to bring it closer to home, that *A Whited Sepulchre* and my video diary material does have a reliable and referential relationship to who I 'really' am, and so that my filmmaking offers an honest 'autobiographical pact' with the audience? Eakin, following Lejeune, defines this 'pact' as

the notion of a contract between author and reader in which autobiographers explicitly commit themselves not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and understand their own lives (1992: 24).

For me there is an intriguing similarity between the 'autobiographical pact' and how I see documentary's 'truth claim', and the link is in the *sincerity* of the effort. As a documentary filmmaker I do not claim to be objective (or 'master of all I survey') but I offer a 'sincere' attempt to understand my subjects' lives, and in the case of autobiographical film, 'to come to terms with and understand' my own life and self as sincerely as possible. This is main reason why I have found the issues stimulated by autobiographical documentary so suggestive for my practice of documentary as a whole.

### **Sincerity:**

This is not to claim that a simple declaration of 'sincerity' on my part lets me off the hook – particularly as, inevitably as a filmmaker, I'm offering a mediated (and so 'performed') version of my sincerity. As Paddy Scannell, in his discussion of Vera Lynn, comments

Sincerity involves a performative paradox. If a person's behaviour is perceived by others as [original emphasis] a performance, it will be judged to be insincere, for sincerity presupposes, as its general condition, the absence of performance. Can one, indeed, [...] communicate one's own sincerity at all, without becoming insincere in the very act of so doing? (1996: 58)

Ross McElwee answered a similar question - about his approach to the women characters in his film *Sherman's March* (1986) - by referring to how his audience is

factoring into their subconscious, somehow, the element of all this being a kind of fiction because this guy [McElwee] is trying to film it all. How can he really be sincere, how can he really be serious? [...] I *am* taking advantage of people, exploiting their goodwill [...]. But there's also something genuine behind this exploitation in some kind of twisted way. There's something real at stake emotionally. If there weren't, the film

would not have worked because people would have been turned off by it.

(in Lucia 1994: 34)

The yardstick I have used for myself is also whether there is ‘something real at stake emotionally’ for me in my video performance of my self. I remember distinctly how I recorded a particularly emotionally raw, ‘night-shot’<sup>87</sup> piece early one morning in Sierra Leone (see Fig. 52), after waking from a nightmare which had prompted me to think how I had become more fearful since my heart operation: ‘I discover that if anything I’m more scared now than I was before ...’ - I confessed to the camera. This thought led me to a tearful acknowledgment of my vulnerability, and finally to a sense that I had worked through something important: ‘... I feel a bit better for saying that I think ..’<sup>88</sup>



Fig. 52

Three things stand out for me from this experience. The first and most prominent is how much I surprised myself with the intensity of feeling that emerged: I had no idea when I started recording that I would feel so upset, or end up talking about fear in this way: there was certainly ‘something real at stake emotionally’. The second is how I composed the shot. I started filming myself front-on, but then put the camera in my lap - I remember, in the midst of my distress, admiring the low angle and the slanted window in the background.

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<sup>87</sup> The ‘night-shot’ facility enables the camera literally to ‘see in the dark’ by shining an infra-red beam onto the subject in front of the lens - an absorbing and intimate process, enabling me to access and express parts of myself that were hidden to me in other circumstances.

<sup>88</sup> This sequence is in Chapter 15 on the DVD – but not this final statement. I have included the whole, unedited clip (Extras 10 on the DVD) so that my original ‘performance’ can be compared with the edited down version. I discuss this and some other instances of exclusion in my editing process in Appendix 3.

Thirdly I remember looking a little nervously into the lens (Fig. 52 again), apprehensive about crying on camera, but also, as a filmmaker, aware that I might have captured a valuable climactic scene - the 'money-shot'<sup>89</sup>.

I offer these memories as evidence of the complexities involved in performing sincerity as a video diarist, but, for me, they do not detract from the need for sincerity as a central component of the autobiographical pact, of the intimate 'contractual' relationship between diarist, camcorder and audience. I agree with Scannell when he suggests that the 'common-sense, recognizable criteria [...] for the kind of performance that will be credited as sincere' are similar to those in intimate relationships:

[...] self-revelation must be spontaneous and genuine, that is, sincere. Sincerity is a form of self-display without concealment, for concealment is a kind of dissembling in which possible disreputable motives are disguised. To be sincere is to be the genuine article, the real thing. It is a necessary condition for trust in the other [...] (1996: 58-59).

Of course in our highly mediatised world there is a danger that 'sincerity' can become just another 'jargon of authenticity' – one more way in which documentary conventions can secure their spurious claim on the real. Because of these pressures the editors of a recent book suggest that '[...] sincerity can be reframed outside of its bond with subjectivity. The current importance and widespread presence of media make such reframing necessary'. They are interested in considering 'sincerity as framed by media, so as to become a media effect instead of a subjectivity effect [...S]incerity is best understood and analyzed as an issue of rhetoric' (Alphen, Bal & Smith 2009: 5). The need for this kind of analysis, they argue, derives from the way in which sincerity has been abused:

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<sup>89</sup> The term that Laura Grindstaff uses to describe 'ordinary people's willingness to sob, scream, bicker and fight on television'. She goes on to say: 'The analogy to pornography is both deliberate and fitting. The climax of most sex scenes in film and video porn, the money shot is the moment of orgasm and ejaculation, offering incontrovertible "proof" of a man's – and occasionally a woman's – "real" sexual excitement and prowess. Pornography thus performs a kind of low-brow ethnography of the body, part of the documentary impulse [...] (1997: 169).

[...] it is necessary to bracket, or even actively refuse, sincerity where it would otherwise continue to exert its oppressive potential. On the other hand, the state of the world in which the opposite of sincerity continues to function – thanks to the rhetoric of sincerity – requires a new theorization of the concept. Within this new theorization the issue of sincerity is no longer one of “being” sincere but of “doing” sincerity. The way in which one deploys media can be sincere, or not (16).

It is my contention that a number of the techniques of video diary making – for instance the embodied nature of self-shooting or the spontaneous piece to camera – lend themselves to ‘doing’ sincerity. Whether this works or not (as a performance of sincerity) is, of course, ultimately up to the audience for the work. They will, as McElwee asserts, detect whether there is ‘something real at stake emotionally’ and if not, ‘be turned off by it’ (Lucia 1994: 34). For Rouch’s notion of ‘cinema-sincerity’ (quoted at the head of this chapter) it is also important that the audience ‘have confidence in the evidence’ (quoted in Macdonald & Cousins 1996: 265). Reception by an audience (rather than particular production techniques, jargons or rhetorics) is becoming increasingly recognised as the only reliable site for proving or disproving documentary’s truth claim. As Winston suggests:

Documentary is, hopefully, shifting to a new site where, because less is claimed, more might be sustained. The basis of documentary difference will not depend on representation (where nothing can be guaranteed) but, far more, on reception (where nothing need be guaranteed) (2008: 286).

### **Radical indexicality:**

The credibility of the performance of sincerity in documentary is what potentially restores trust in the indexical image - the belief in ‘this has been’. For me this is not just ‘personal’ - a concern about the individual relationship of filmmaker to audience – but also wider and more ‘political’. Jane Gaines has recently championed what she calls ‘radical indexicality’ which asserts:

the belief in the lost indexical connection to the world. Note, in this regard, an interesting coincidence. This is the coincidence of the felt loss of the indexical connection and the loss of Marxism. We should wonder about the ascendance of the digital over the photographic image and the demise of Marxism worldwide. It may be “just a coincidence,” and then again, it may not be (Gaines 2005: 4).

It's clear from her paper that she doesn't see this loss as coincidental, but rather as an ideological shift that is very convenient to ruling-class interests, because the photographic index beneath the non indexical “touch up” is a lesson in causality. This kind of sign, [...] suggests that events, too, are “really connected” to their causes (3).

Unless we believe, when we look at an image, that ‘this has been’, that the photographic referent is ‘the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens’ (Barthes 1993: 76 - original emphasis), film loses its capacity (that Gaines suggests Marxism also possessed) to show us how the world works, what forces shape it, what the links are between events and their causes. So, Gaines asserts, ‘the indexical keeps alive the paradigm of economic and social causation’ (11).

The indexical is able to do this because we are being shown authentic aspects of the ‘truth’ - ‘*necessarily* real’ things. This notion challenges the scepticism of much post-structuralist and postmodern thought about both the ‘truth’ and the authenticity of the subject. Many feminist critiques have pointed out that this scepticism has been heavily inflected by gendered and class interests:

When western white males – who traditionally have controlled the production of knowledge – can no longer define the truth [...] their response is to conclude that there is not a truth to be discovered’ (Sarah Lennox quoted in Mascia-Lees & Sharpe 2000: 25).

This has echoes both of Liz Stanley's contention, cited before, that ‘the death of the author’, for the male academic, is ‘a very convenient death’ because the moment he ‘has an accusatory finger pointed at him, the author at this point

conveniently dies' (Stanley 1992: 17), and of the irony that Spivak points out that 'the ones talking about the critique of the subject are the ones who have had the luxury of a subject' (1988: 272).

Hartsock makes a similar point:

Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then, the concept of subjecthood becomes 'problematic'? (1987: 196).

The conclusion of these critiques is that these male, postmodern epistemological doubts can clearly be seen as underhand re-assertions of privilege<sup>90</sup>.

So for me, asserting the relatedness of the functions of 'truth', authorship, subjecthood and indexicality in autobiographical filmmaking has a fundamentally 'political' purpose: to assert that our selves, as film subjects, are 'really connected' to our actual selves in the 'real world'; that, despite the fact that we, as Kaplan pointed out, 'are constructed in the film processes of camera, lighting, sound, editing', we still have an 'other ontological existence for the spectator than that of representation' (1983: 128). I believe that all documentary subjects have what James Agee, more than half a century ago, called an 'immeasurable weight in *actual* existence' (1960: 12 - my emphasis), and that it is this weight that underpins the political significance of the autobiographical project: 'to speak "I" is, after all, firstly a political act of self-awareness and self-affirmation' (Rascaroli 2009: 2). As Renov asserts

"who we are", particularly for a citizenry massively separated from the engines of representation – the advertising, news, and entertainment industries – is a vital expression of agency. We are not only what we do in a world of images: we are also what we show ourselves to be. [...] autobiography has become a crucial medium of resistance and counterdiscourse [...] (Renov 2004: xvi)

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<sup>90</sup> I have borrowed much of the argument in this paragraph from Morley (1992: 191-2).

There is a strong link, hinted at in what Renov says here, between the political and the personal dangers of losing our belief in indexicality. If we are alienated from our selves, if we don't recognise ourselves, if we have a weak or damaged 'self-image', if we experience ourselves as in-authentic, if our sense of self is so fractured as to completely inhibit our agency, then we too, individually and collectively, will have been rendered incapable of changing ourselves or our surroundings, and will end up suspended in fragmented and isolated passivity in our post-modern soup. As Juhasz says of this 'fragmentation':

[...] while this may be continually exciting to post-modern cowboys endlessly anticipating the demise of the self, it has never served well people who are political, people who need to stand strong together [...] (2008: 307)

The kind of autobiographical documentary I've been championing in this text is made in defiance of this fragmentation, entailing the yoking of the indexical sign with the autobiographical impulse to 'do sincerity'. It is a vehicle for saying, sincerely, visibly, and out loud: 'I exist, this world I'm showing you my relationship to also exists, and these are some of the real effects of my agency in this world'.



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# Appendix 1:

## Autobiographical films made since 2000:

There were sprinklings of first person films in the 1970s, an increase in their production in the 1980s, and a virtual explosion in the 1990s, showing no signs of abatement today. (Lebow 2008: xiii)

At the beginning of a new century, the return to subjectivity, to the exploration of a seeing, feeling, and even healing self expressed cinematically, is newly charged (Renov 2004: xxiv)

To signal the wealth of autobiographical documentary that has been produced recently, I have made a list of films produced since the year 2000 (in rough chronological order), and which I haven't discussed or cited in the text above. These are all films in which the filmmakers are portraying themselves and/or their relationships or other aspects of their lives. Because they themselves (or their families) aren't their main subjects, the nine documentary films by Nick Broomfield, Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock produced since 2000 are therefore excluded, somewhat arbitrarily, as obviously all of them have some definitely autobiographical characteristics. Also excluded are the significant number of films (like Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005), Osmond and Rothwell's *Deep Water* (2006) and Jarecki's *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), which use a large amount of autobiographically generated diary footage, but were directed by filmmakers who didn't themselves generate that footage.

All the films listed below have had significant distribution (on television or the cinema in the UK and elsewhere) and/or some exposure at international festivals. The fact that there are so many of them (and many others may have escaped my notice) indicates both the current level of interest in this mode of filmmaking, and the range of work being produced<sup>91</sup>.

1. In ***Men in the Woods*** (2001) Film-maker Jane Treays, who was "flashed" at twice as a child, looks into the phenomenon of male indecent exposure. Of the controversial film, the Mirror newspaper wrote: "Acclaimed filmmaker Jane Treays brilliantly draws on personal experience to tell of the effects of indecent exposure on children. Jane was brave to make this film and Channel 4 was bold to screen it"
2. Alan Berliner is a filmmaker who has worked consistently in autobiographical mode since his films *Intimate Stranger* (1991) and *Nobody's Business* (1996) – the latter a portrait of his father. In ***The Sweetest Sound*** (2001) he invites the twelve other 'Alan Berliners' from around the world over for dinner in New York to interrogate the issue of name and identity.

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<sup>91</sup> The range includes family films, often revealing family secrets, or searches for relatives living or dead (most often fathers), medical trauma, using the first personal voice and autobiographical content to (indirectly) illuminate a larger social or political question (Israel features often in this category), films using personal archive or/and that are significantly about the filmmaking process.

3. **Habit** (2001) is an autobiographical documentary by Greg Bordowitz that follows the daily routine of the videomaker, a veteran AIDS activist in the U.S. who has been living with AIDS for more than ten years.
4. Director John Smith describes **Hotel Diaries** (2001-7)<sup>92</sup>: 'Made over six years in the hotels of six different countries, *Hotel Diaries* is a series of video recordings which relate personal experiences to the current conflicts in the Middle East. [...] the hotel room is employed as a 'found' film set, where the architecture, furnishing and decoration become the means by which the filmmaker's small adventures are linked to major world events.'
5. In **August: A Moment Before the Eruption** (2002) Israeli filmmaker Avi Mograbi goes out to document August, as he believes that this month is a metaphor of all that he hates about his native country.
6. In **More Than a Life**: (2002) Luke Holland followed his brother Peter's five-year fatal battle with a rare form of bone marrow cancer.
7. **All About My Father** (2002) – Even Benestad (the film director) tells the story of his father, Espen Benestad, who is a transvestite and seeks his son's acceptance.
8. **Flashback** (2002): Herz Frank, the Latvian filmmaker, mulls over his life in cinema, against the background of his and his wife's failing health.
9. **Gina Kim's Video Diary** (2002): an account of a 22 year old Korean filmmaker's journey to the US to find a new direction in her life.
10. **100 Doors** (2003) – Kerri Davenport-Burton – a young woman explores her homeless years by re-visiting doorways where she slept.
11. **My Architect**: (2004) Norman Khan's film about his relationship with his father, the architect Louis Khan.
12. **Letter to True** – (2004) Bruce Weber's autobiographical essay film, whose central character (apart from himself) is his Golden Retriever dog, True.
13. **Hiding and Seeking: Faith and Tolerance After the Holocaust** (2004) portrays director Menachem Daum's attempt to teach tolerance to his Israeli sons on a trip back to Poland.
14. In **The Gaze of Michelangelo** (2004), the final short film by Michelangelo Antonioni, the Italian director films himself alongside the Renaissance artist Michelangelo's statue of Moses at the Church of St Pietro in Rome.
15. **As Life Goes By** (2005) – French filmmaker Lionel Legros records himself dying of cancer.

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<sup>92</sup> At [www.johnsmithfilms.com/texts/sf13.html](http://www.johnsmithfilms.com/texts/sf13.html) (accessed 10/10/09)

16. **51 Birch Street** (2005) When Doug Block's mother dies unexpectedly and his father swiftly marries his former secretary, he discovers two parents who are far more complex and troubled than he ever imagined.
17. **Baghdad Days** (2005) Hiba Bassem, a young woman from Kirkuk, returns to Baghdad after the war, to finish her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts. The film is a diary of her year as she tries to find a place to live, looks for work, graduates from college, deals with family problems and struggles to come to terms with her position as a woman on her own in Iraq.
18. **Le Filmeur** (2005) Alain Cavalier's 'intriguing 'home movie' spanning a decade of the filmmaker's life but containing singularly personal moments' (IMDB).
19. **Phantom Limb** (2005) a film about grief and loss written and directed by Jay Rosenblatt, who comments: 'The death of my seven-year-old brother when I was nine remains a painful and haunting memory. My parents did not know how to cope with the loss of their child and the entire family experienced indescribable pain. *Phantom Limb* uses this personal story as a point of departure.'
20. **Return to Normandy** (2006), described as Nicolas Philibert's 'first foray into confessional 'first person' cinema'<sup>93</sup>, this film documents the filmmaker's journey back to the rural location of a film on which he was assistant director in 1975.
21. Alan Berliner has made one more autobiographical film since 2000 - **Wide Awake** (2006) – about his insomnia.
22. **Description of a Memory** (2006) Fragments of memory and autobiographical searching, in which Dan Geva attempts to link Israel's past and present to Chris Marker's 1960 cinematic essay, *Description of a Struggle*.
23. **Operation Filmmaker** (2007) In an act of philanthropy after the fall of Baghdad in 2003, a young film student, Muthana Mohamed, is invited to come to Prague to work on an American movie. Documenting this process, US filmmaker Nina Davenport becomes increasingly involved in the young Iraqi's life, revealing the power dynamics between her and her Iraqi subject.
24. **Santa Fe Street** (2007) Director Carmen Castillo returns to her native Chile to revisit the history of MIR – the Chilean underground resistance in the early days of the Pinochet regime – of which she was a part.
25. **Tovarisch, I'm Not Dead** (2007) Stuart Urban traces his father's mysterious 1940s wartime exploits in Russia and Europe.
26. **My Winnipeg** (2007) is Guy Maddin's surreal portrait of his hometown – including reconstructions of his relationship with his mother.
27. In **Dear Talula** (2007) Lori J. Benson mixes observational footage, with home videos and family photographs, to show how she transforms her breast cancer diagnosis into a journey of self discovery.

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<sup>93</sup> by Geoff Andrew in *Sight and Sound*, February 2008

28. **Wild Blue Yonder** (2007) Just seven years old when her father David Maysles died in 1987, Celia Maysles had no idea her father and his brother Albert were pioneers of vérité documentary filmmaking. In this film Celia sets out to rediscover her father by using his own artistic process: vérité filmmaking.
29. **Learned by Heart** (2007), Marjut Rimminen's animation film is an account of growing up in Finland, that is simultaneously a self- and national portrait.
30. **Substitute** (2008) Vikash Dhorasoo, the French midfielder who played in every game for France for the 2006 World Cup, describes what it felt like to have to sit out all but 14 minutes of the finals on the subs bench, up to and including the final itself.
31. **Mum and Me** (2008) Sue Bourne's portrait (made with her daughter) of her mother living with Alzheimer's.
32. In **Prodigal Sons** (2008) director Kimberly Reed explores her relationship with her adopted brother Marc following his discovery that he is the grandson of Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth.
33. In **The Family** (2008) Joanna Rudnick. At 31, the filmmaker faces the decision to remove her breasts and ovaries or risk incredible odds of developing cancer.
34. **Of Time and The City** (2008) Terence Davies' portrait of his hometown, Liverpool, interwoven with an account of his own childhood feelings about religion the cinema, and his sexual development.
35. In Ross McElwee's **In Paraguay** (2008) McElwee and his wife Marilyn decided to adopt a child, and made arrangements to become new parents of a baby girl living in Paraguay.
36. **Waltz With Bashir** (2008) Ari Folman's animated documentary in which he attempts to remember and come to terms with his experience, during his military service in the Israeli army, of the Sabra and Shatila massacres.
37. **My Israel:** (2008) Yulie Cohen was injured while working as a El-AI stewardess in a terrorist attack in 1978 by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. This film documents her journey as she campaigns to get the man who almost killed her released and tries to reconcile with her ultra orthodox brother after 25 years of estrangement. The film revisits her previous trilogy *My Terrorist* (2002), *My Land Zion* (2004), and *My Brother* (2007) with new footage.
38. **The Beaches of Agnes** (2009) is Agnes Varda's look back over her life and filmmaking, partly by revisiting her favourite beaches.

## Appendix 2

### Audience responses to *A Whited Sepulchre*

I have shown the film to a range of people, in rough and final versions, mostly at conferences and to university audiences with an interest in media and film studies or anthropology and sociology, but I haven't gathered data from these viewings in a systematic fashion. So I'm not claiming any scientific or objective basis to what follows. However, given the points that I make in the conclusion about the importance of audience responses to (my) autobiographical sincerity, it seems important to include in this text some of the opinions people have expressed to me about the film. These are from emails people sent me after the viewings, so inevitably skewed in my favour, as they were friends or mostly already knew me in some way. I indicate the nature of our relationship before each quote.

At some of these viewings I also asked people to respond by posting opinions on a blog I set up for the purpose – they can be read on <http://awhitedsepulchre.wordpress.com/> Hopefully, as I continue to show the film, the debate will continue there.

Ex-student from Jordan:

just wanted to thank you for showing us your film today.. really enjoyed it, it was very human and i believe relevant to many brits with colonial grandparents.  
its funny that the first film you ever made had sheep in it, mine is as well, mine is actually about a sheppard and his mobile phone, very cute 5 min film with lots of sheep.

Latin American academic at conference, not previously known to me:

I dont think I had the chance to tell you, but what I found most interesting about your film is the reversal of strategic positioning and the way it challenges the notion of the white male gaze as authoritarian and imperial. nice and unusual.

Academic colleague and friend:

I think it will be a very valuable and stimulating example of a film that combines an self-reflexive autobiographical voice which connects with a wider history. [...] it seems to me that the film is most powerful when we see the similarities and differences visually through forms of repetition and other kinds of analogy which tell us more than direct questions or statements. in this respect hearing about your dreams work really well and the implied connections between your mother's remoteness and AK's stiff upper lip and the revealing things we hear about him from your elderly relatives.

Sheffield Documentary Festival – Review (the film wasn't accepted for the Festival!):

Tony Dowmunt retraces the journey his great grandfather took in the imperial army in Sierra Leone in 1880. Presented in the form of a video diary inter cut with interviews and archive footage. A journey of self discovery that touches upon the issue of racism amongst classes and the contrasts and similarities over

130 years. No real conflicts to drive the narrative, and left feeling dissatisfied at the end, however in parts the cinematography is exceptional.

Filmmaker, academic, ex-work colleague:

The film was a great example of how to tell the story using a range of techniques- confession, metaphor, memories, collected items, and was just so crafted. The amount of thought and time you had invested, and the sheer candidness of it (it felt like a risky film, as a viewer, it was painfully honest at times) was extremely effective. Self reflexivity is such a tough one to pull off: the line between indulgent gibberish (a term therapists rightly dislike) and genuinely revealing and insightful reflection is so hard to get right. [...] for me the issues were belonging, relationships with family, racism, what it means to be English, male and privileged, and how we take our histories with us. What we do with that in the present is what the film seemed to constantly refer back to.

Academic PhD Supervisee:

I really enjoyed your film, particularly the way you wove the political and the personal together to such great effect. It was really inspiring for my own work

Friend:

I thought your film very brave in revealing you as vulnerable to your family's history and politics and even more so where you were exposed on a personal level. Congratulations on your courage and thank you for inviting me to witness it.

Friend (and former [medical] doctor):

I found your film very powerful and moving. I've never seen anything quite like it before: an extraordinary interweaving of your own personal story, your great-grandfather's story and the story of Sierra Leone. Each of these stories having wider implications about personal development in different contexts; about different social and historical realities; about the contrast between rich whites and poor blacks.

I admire your openness and honesty in the film. It seems your gr-gr-f was doing his best to be honest in his letters, but from such a different awareness.

I love the richness of the film, the way you've constructed and edited it: absolutely absorbing, full of surprises, compassionate. It faces the grim human realities of poverty, colonialism, slavery, racism, war, the proximity of illness and death. Lightened and made bearable by the colour, the humanity of the interviewees, the touches of humour, and even startling shots of natural beauty and wildlife. I enjoyed the varied use of still images, some superimposed. The inclusion of your cardiac scan was powerful.

I felt drawn into the stories effortlessly, without any sense of being lectured to or preached at. You present everything in a personal, straightforward, non-judgmental way. The antithesis of many propagandising documentaries.

I came away feeling kind of ashamed, by association, to be a white man, even though my own ancestors were living in Russia in poverty when all this was going on. I suppose because I still enjoy the enduring benefits of colonialism to the UK. You showed the terrible contrasts between life in Sierra Leone and our own here: your family home against their shacks, your childhood against theirs, your healthcare against theirs, psychotherapy against ritual dance.

The individual stories, your own, your gr-gr-f's, those of the people of Sierra Leone, made the history real, beyond comfortable travellers' tales or

autobiography. Uncomfortable as it was to witness your crying, both in the therapy footage and the sequence to camera, it forcibly underlined the reality of the stories. (Contrast the understated comments about your gr-gr-f by his niece and grandchildren; after all, this was a man who happily shot 'niggers' to 'teach them a lesson'.) I like to think that your tears, while very much your own, somehow in the film also stood for and resonated with all the unrecorded tears of the people of Sierra Leone and of your family.

Ex-student:

Just wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed the film. I found it engaging, enlightening and moving, you made some brave decisions and I feel they paid off, and all underscored with a wry sense of self deprecating humour. You showed great integrity in what is your very own, "Heart of Darkness". I'd say well done but feel I would sound too much like a lecturer.

Ex-TV filmmaker/friend:

Just to remind you that I thought your film was just lovely. So open and funny and the two time frames so so cleverly put together. I loved your tone that was honest, and yet not self-obsessed. Truly delightful. I want the next episode please!

Friend:

Hi Tony, what a fantastic film you've made - the story, the images and words are practically seared on my mind! congratulations and respect as they say - I would never have had the bravery (or the creative ability and sheer inventiveness) to do what you did - its a great and wonderful achievement.

Friend/TV producer:

congratulations on a provocative, brave, multi-layered and intelligent piece of work. Lovely humour as well

Teaching colleague at Goldsmiths:

Very, very impressive film [...] I imagine you saw the historical doc Simon Schama did on the free colonist experiment. I am afraid I fell asleep watching that. I think your gripping, iconoclastic and original film deserves a showing on C4/More4

Teaching colleague at Goldsmiths:

I'm so very glad I saw your film yesterday. Thank you for arranging the screening. I was trying to decide on my horrendous journey home, if it was my friendship with the lead man in *A Whited Sepulchre* that kept me so utterly engaged throughout the piece. However, I had to conclude that this fact served only as a bonus to a riveting story, sensitively revealed and I must say, beautifully edited! You are very brave to attempt this without any masking of your own emotional involvement in your history, but I would be extremely surprised if any of the viewers in Screen 1 last night were not deeply moved by the experience of watching your very personal documentary. I know I was. It touched me on many levels.

I sincerely hope that the making of the film assuaged some of the pain that you've so obviously experienced. As I've got older I realise that the 'perfect family' is a myth and we all carry deep regrets about one or two issues in this

respect.

You've done much to set the record straight re your Grandfather - so congratulations on that. One of my Grandfathers from way back was Captain Cook - should I be proud or ashamed? I'll leave you with that conundrum!

Colleague at Goldsmiths (teaches writing):

Just wanted to say how much I enjoyed your film yesterday, Tony. Very moving - much more so than the rough I saw ages ago. The parallels between the two journeys came over really well and as a film it was so engaging that it was a bump when it ended. When it was over XXX and I were enthusing to each other about it and one of the words she used was 'brave'. ... I've been doing some memoir writing the past few months and I have to agree. I can see that the step between making such a personal piece and putting it out there is really huge compared to more 'objective' work

Teaching colleague at Goldsmiths:

Sorry I had to rush off. It seemed so rude when you had shown us something which was so personal. I think its really interesting how hard it is for our generation to 'claim' our background. The guilt of privilege is not easy to talk about. Thanks for having the courage

Teaching colleague at Goldsmiths:

thanks for a wonderful film - i found it gripping, exposing, and provocative. i'd forgotten that you were very ill and airlifted out so that functioned as a great narrative twist! i was haunted by several things after, but most strongly by the image of your mother with a cigarette - it just says so much about the women of that generation and class and their aspirations and disappointments.

Film teacher at another university:

I loved your film that you showed in the summer - I thought it was a brave and thoroughly engaging piece of work.

Film teacher at another university:

Thanks for *The Whited Sepulchre* - really enjoyed it and admired your energy and resolve to put yourself centre frame during your 'argument'.

Ex-student (Turkish):

- last night I watched again your film with great pleasure. Thank you so much for sending it to me; as I guessed it was very influential to my new project. I can now see very clearly how tight it is made, how you cover all aspects of while on the one hand playing with the idea of video diary and the reason for recording one's self and on the other side a historical debate and humour always present when things get heavy. i also like very much how we are invited in certain aspects of your life and others remain as mystery. it is obvious that a video diary doesn't have to cover it all but yours seem to be so nicely focused.

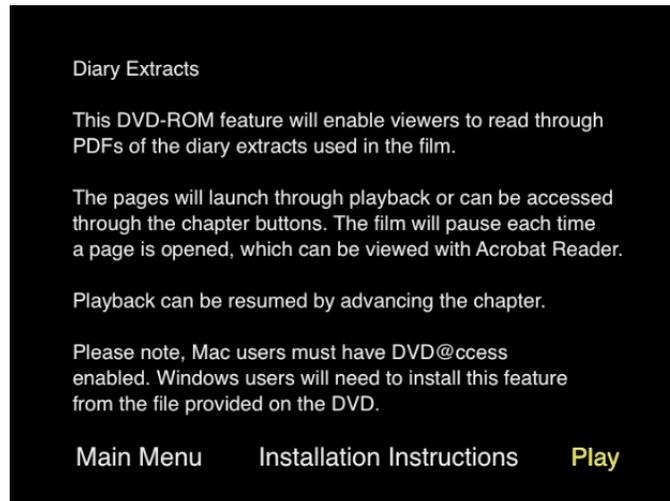
## Appendix 3: How to use the DVD

When you insert the DVD into a computer or DVD Player you will get this menu to choose from:



**Thesis Text:** uploads the PDF of this text. **Play Documentary:** will start the film for uninterrupted viewing.

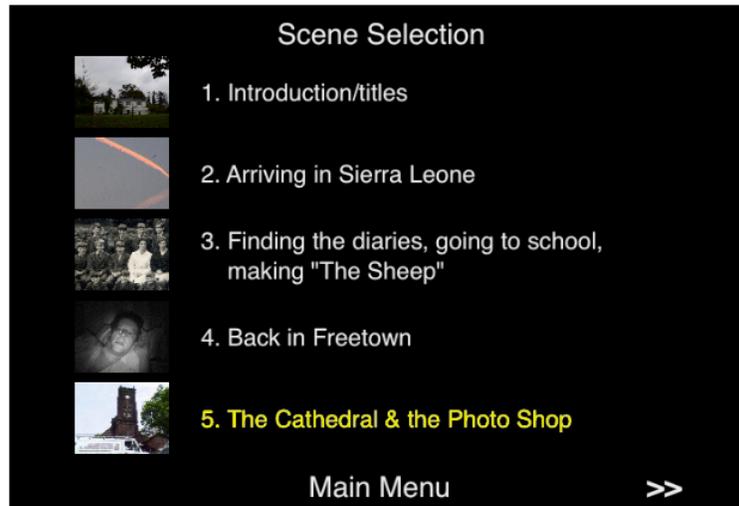
**Diary:** will produce this menu (this facility ONLY available when viewing on computers):



Choose 'Installation Instructions' and follow the Windows or Macintosh route – depending on the type of computer you are using. The 'Diary' function features PDFs of whole pages scanned from AK's diaries – which contain all the passages (highlighted in the PDFs) that I have quoted in the film. The film is viewable – pausing for diary extracts as outlined in the menu above – by pressing 'Play'. Press play again to resume viewing

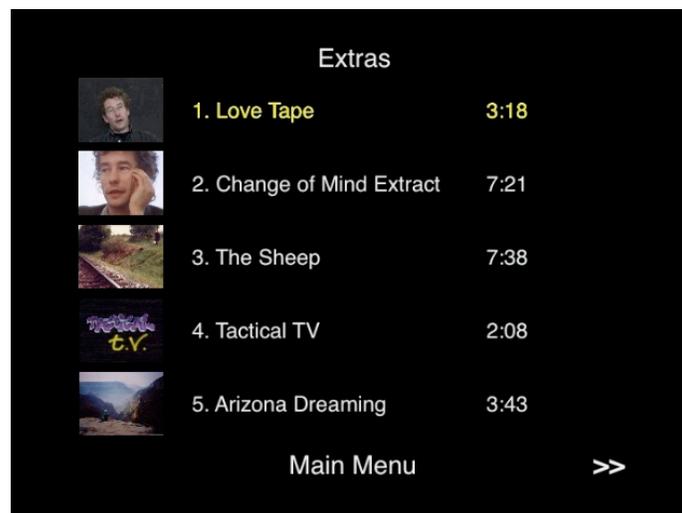
the film. The PDFs can also be viewed separately from the film by opening the disc in the normal way on your computer (see Diary Extracts below for the full list of Diary PDFs).

**Scene Selection** will produce this menu (of chapters in *A Whited Sepulchre*):



There are 17 chapters/scenes in all: access by using the arrows at the bottom of the screen.

**Extras** will produce this menu (of unedited clips from material that ended up in *A Whited Sepulchre* in shortened form, and of other video material quoted in the thesis text):



There are 12 'Extras' in all: again access by using the arrows at the bottom of the screen.

## Autobiographical ‘sincerity’ and editing:

As indicated in many places in the text above, I have included a number of elements on the DVD which are designed to illuminate, and open to question, aspects of my editing practice on *A Whited Sepulchre*. It seems important to do this as my research thesis as a whole has set great store by notions of authenticity and sincerity in documentary practice – and these are clearly as sorely tested in the processes of editing, as in shooting.

These elements on the DVD are:

**AK’s diaries**, from which I quoted in the film, are in three volumes of at least 500 pages in total – so it will be clear that I have been highly selective. I think I have been ‘fair’ to him, but I’m aware that my need to repudiate his racism and imperialism may have led me to exaggerate his opinions – or, alternatively, has my familial connection to him led me to soften the impact of his views? I’m hoping that the facility that the DVD offers (of being able to refer to the page(s) being ‘quoted’ in the film while watching it) will enable the viewers to assess my biases and judge for themselves, as well as to get a more rounded view of AK and his thoughts than was possible to give in the film. I have purposely included four sets of consecutive pages – about AK’s visit to Bunce Island (PDFs 7-12), a long entry detailing his racist opinions (PDF 13), his account of the Bobo Dance (PDF 34), and his mourning of his dog (PDF 37), which give a flavour of how he writes complete entries.

### **Diary Extracts:**

- PDF 1:** (begins) ‘This country is clothed with luxuriant vegetation ..’  
**PDF 2:** ‘If my limited experience of the negro ..’  
**PDF 3:** ‘We disembarked at 4.30 ..’  
**PDF 4:** ‘Was up at 6 and went to the balconies..’  
**PDF 5:** ‘Clothes very rapidly get destroyed here ..’  
**PDF 6:** ‘It’s not a cheerful place to examine ..’  
**PDF 7-12:** ‘Had a great day last Sunday..’ (the whole 8 pages of AK’s entry about his visit to Bunce Island)  
**PDF 13:** ‘These niggers crowd to church ..’ (+ 2 adjoining pages which AK describes as ‘much gas on the vexed question of the nigger’)  
**PDF 14:** ‘Sunday morning, January 4<sup>th</sup>, Roquette ..’  
**PDF 15-16:** ‘Roquette is a very large and flourishing place ..’  
**PDF 17:** ‘All the houses were of mud ..’  
**PDF 18:** ‘On the following morning I thought I’d try ..’  
**PDF 19:** ‘This makes the third successive Christmas ..’  
**PDF 20:** ‘In the bush, 60 miles from ..’  
**PDF 21:** ‘The profuse perspiration brought on by fever ..’  
**PDF 22:** ‘A week today since I shaved ..’  
**PDF 23:** ‘Robari was the stronghold ..’  
**PDF 24:** ‘The perpetual petty internecine wars ..’  
**PDF 25:** ‘.. an expedition to break down ..’  
**PDF 26:** ‘They had started early in the morning ..’  
**PDF 27:** ‘The rapidity and ease with which the dreaded Yonnies ..’  
**PDF 28-29:** ‘This afternoon Alldridge arrived ..’

- PDF 30:** 'Distinguished company are sleeping under my roof ..'  
**PDF 31:** 'Hang it all ..'  
**PDF 32:** '.. slaughtered numbers of luckless natives ..'  
**PDF 33:** 'Friday January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1981 ..'  
**PDF 34:** 'Saw strange sight yesterday afternoon ..'  
**PDF 35:** '.. abominable great "Johnny Crows" ..'  
**PDF 36:** 'I am only thankful that I came down ..'  
**PDF 37:** '.. a night of real sorrow, Poor Jemmy ..' (+ 2 further pages about his dog)
- 

The DVD also features **Unedited clips – “Extras”** – culled from material that has ended up in the film in shortened form. Most of these are referenced in the text above. These include the *Change of Mind* extract (**Extras 2 on the DVD**), the whole of *The Sheep* film, (**3**), and the 'Fear' to-camera piece (**Extras 10**) I discuss in the Conclusion (p. 175). I ended up including only a clip from this latter piece in the finished *Whited Sepulchre* film, partly because of its length, but also because in its entirety it seemed to 'over-egg the pudding' in its depiction of my distress. I have also included the whole of a video dairy piece I made in the hospital in Sierra Leone (**Extras 11**) which I edited down for similar reasons to the 'Fear' to-camera piece: the details of my medical distress seemed to fit into the 'too much information' category! In both cases however, it may be that my personal squeamishness about revealing myself as vulnerable in these ways was a factor: so I'm including them here.

Perhaps the most notable of all the sequences that ended up on 'the cutting room floor' (in its entirety), was this one (**Extras 12**) which featured my partner Jane, who visited me in Sierra Leone over Christmas and the New year, during the shoot. The ostensible reason why my co-editor, Jerry Rothwell, and myself decided to leave it out was that the 'story' of the film seemed to 'flow' much better without it. It had a 'travelogue'/holiday movie feel which we felt didn't 'belong' in the film we were editing. However, I'm acutely aware of the lack of women (apart from my mother!) elsewhere in the film – and of the fact that this absence of women and the 'domestic' has a clear relationship to, and resonance with, 'imperial adventure' in all its forms - which maybe too influenced our decision to exclude the sequence. Hence its - 'auto-critical' - inclusion here.

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## Appendix 4: Examiners' Comments

This PhD project was examined and 'viva'd' in the Spring of 2010, by John Corner and Victoria Mapplebeck.

**Professor John Corner** is in the School of Politics and Communication Studies at the University of Liverpool. He was educated at Ruskin College, Oxford and Christ's College, Cambridge. His main teaching and research interests are in the areas of broadcast journalism, documentary, media audiences, political communication and cultural analysis. He has written widely in books and journals and is an editor of the journal *Media, Culture and Society*.

**Victoria Mapplebeck** is a Senior Lecturer and teaches on the MA Documentary by Practice at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is a director of creative documentary films and series for cinema, TV and the web, and has received a variety of commissions for her films including The Arts Council of England, Film Four and Channel 4. Her work explores issues of intimacy, media ethics and interactive technologies.

The seven pages that follow this are scanned copies of their reports as submitted to the University of London.

PHD EXAMINATION (Please attach copies of joint and preliminary reports to this sheet)

Candidate's Name: [PLEASE USE CAPITALS] TONY DOWNMUNT

College: Geol

Names of Examiners: [PLEASE USE CAPITALS] MS V MAPPLEBEEK

Prof J Coenrae

1. The examiners report that they have examined the thesis submitted by the candidate and have also examined the candidate orally on the subject of the thesis and on subjects relevant thereto:

Date of oral examination 14/3/2010 Was Supervisor present: YES  NO

2. The examiners further report that they have satisfied themselves that the thesis  
Please tick relevant boxes unless reporting 3(2) or 3(6)

- |   |                                     |   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| (a) is genuinely the work of the candidate  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | g) includes discussion of those findings and how they advance the study of the subject  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| (b) forms a distinct contribution to knowledge of the subject   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (h) in so doing demonstrates a deep and synoptic understanding of the field of study, objectivity and the capacity for judgment in complex situations and autonomous work in that field | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) affords evidence of originality:<br>(1) by the discovery of new facts<br><i>and/or</i><br>(2) by the exercise of independent critical power | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (i) is satisfactory as regards literary presentation  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| (d) is an integrated whole and presents a coherent argument   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (j) includes a full bibliography and references   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| (e) gives a critical assessment of the relevant literature  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (k) demonstrates research skills relevant to the thesis   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| (f) describes the method of research and its findings   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (l) is of a standard to merit publication in whole, in part or in a revised form  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

3. The examiners report that they have determined one of the following: Please tick relevant box

- (1) That the candidate has satisfied them in the examination for the degree of Ph.D.
- (2) That to satisfy the examiners in the examination for the degree of Ph.D. the candidate is required to make specified minor amendments to the examiners' satisfaction within three months (see overleaf) [see para 33 of Guidance]
- (3) That the candidate be permitted to re-enter for the examination for the Ph.D degree and to re-present the thesis in a revised form within eighteen months. [A further oral examination is at the discretion of the examiners.]   
A further oral examination is:  required  not required  not yet decided
- (4) That the candidate be permitted to re-enter for the oral examination (on the same thesis) not later than .....
- (5) That the candidate has satisfied the criteria for the award of the degree of M.Phil and should be awarded this degree.
- (6) That to satisfy the requirements for the degree of MPhil, the candidate is required to make specified minor amendments to the examiners' satisfaction within three months (see overleaf) [see para 33 of Guidance]
- (7) That the candidate be permitted to enter the examination for the degree of M.Phil and to re-present the thesis in a revised form within twelve months.
- (8) That the candidate has not satisfied them in the examination. (Such a candidate will not be permitted to re-enter for the examination for the Ph.D or the M.Phil degree).

\*A period not exceeding eighteen months should be specified by the examiners.

[Continued overleaf]

**4. Preliminary Reports [PLEASE ATTACH THE PRELIMINARY REPORTS TO THIS SHEET]**

4.1 Please attach the independent preliminary report prepared by each examiner, and signed and dated, to this sheet. Except in the case of an appeal against the result of the examination, the candidate will not receive copies of the preliminary reports unless the examiners indicate below that they wish the candidate to do so.

4.2 We wish the candidate to receive copies of our preliminary reports YES  NO

**5. Final Joint Report [PLEASE ALSO ATTACH THE FINAL JOINT REPORT TO THIS SHEET]**

5.1 The final joint report should give the grounds on which your decision is based, which should include the candidate's name; thesis title; the signatures of each of the examiners; and the date. [please see para 26 of Guidance]

5.2 The candidate will be provided with a copy of this report. Please do not make reference to the preliminary reports in the final report unless you have indicated in paragraph 4.2 above that the candidate should receive copies of them.

**6. Minor Amendments**

6.1 If you have determined as in Section 3, option (2) or (6) overleaf, you may require the candidate to make specified minor amendments to your satisfaction within three months. You should set out clearly the amendments you require to be made, normally in writing and normally within two weeks of the oral. [please see para 33 of Guidance]. If you have chosen this option, you do not at this stage need to complete para 2 over.

6.2 This sheet together with the attachments specified in paragraphs 4 and 5 above should be submitted to the Research Degree Examinations Office\* normally within two weeks of the oral. You may advise the candidate direct of the necessary amendments or you may request the RDE Office to do so. In the latter case you should return the copies of the thesis to the Senate House with a list of the amendments you require the candidate to make and indicate in paragraph 6.3 below to whom the thesis should be sent for checking that the amendments have been completed satisfactorily. Provision has been made below for reporting on minor amendments completed satisfactorily within two weeks of the oral examination.

6.3 We confirm that: *Insert name(s) if applicable and tick relevant box*

- 1) The candidate has been provided with a list of the minor amendments and asked to send the thesis to ..... for checking that the amendments have been completed satisfactorily.
- 2) The RDE Office is asked to send the attached list of the minor amendments to the candidate. The corrected thesis should be sent to ..... for checking that the amendments have been completed satisfactorily.
- 3) The candidate has made the minor amendments required to our satisfaction

Examiners' signatures

*S. Carter*

Date

19/03/10

*V. Mapp*

Date

19/03/10

Please return this sheet within two weeks of the oral examination, together with the joint report, preliminary reports, list of minor amendments (if applicable) and theses (if applicable) to the \*Research Degree Examinations Office, Room NBQ1, University of London, Senate House, Malet Street, London, WC1E7HU

**Joint Examiners' Report on Doctoral Submission.**  
**Tony Downmunt, 'A Whited Sepulchre' (Goldsmiths' College).**

As the independent examiners' reports show, this was judged to be an impressive submission, combining an innovative and thoughtful documentary film with a thesis that both situated the film biographically and attempted to place it in the context of current developments in practice and in theory.

The film is essentially a double journey, both a kind of critical 'travelogue' following the 19<sup>th</sup> century movements and experiences of one of the director/writer's ancestors in Sierra Leone and a much more personal exploration drawing on a range of other materials and reflections. It is an original and provocative piece of film-making, working within the 'autobiographical' mode but offering some distinctive approaches in so doing, as well as a provocative commentary on its 'exterior' subject, which is essentially aspects of the character of British colonialism in Africa.

The accompanying thesis makes connections with a range of relevant literature and offers a thoughtful attempt to reconcile some disparate and conflicting positions both about the character of subjectivity and the nature of documentary practice in relation to the co-ordinates of 'the real'. Occasionally, the arguments tacks too quickly across contrasting points, leaving room for further clarification and a more thorough working through of some of the difficult questions it raises, but this does not greatly impair its qualities as a broad review of the theory in relation to the practice.

In the viva, the candidate was clear and convincing in his defence of the submission and in accounting for the positions he had taken both in making the film and writing the thesis. He was very willing to acknowledge those points where there was scope for further work in any future development for publication of the written material.

Following the viva, both the examiners judged the submission, without reservation, to have fulfilled the requirement for the award of Ph.D.

John Corner *John Corner*  
Date..... *24/03/10* .....

Victoria Mapplebeck *Victoria Mapplebeck*  
Date..... *29/03/10* ..... Examiners.

**A Whited Sepulchre: Autobiography and Video Diaries in 'post documentary culture' - By Tony Downumt- Goldsmith, University of London**

**Preliminary Report - Victoria Mapplebeck**

I am impressed by both the complexity and quality of the research. In terms of the Practice research, I found *The White Sepulchre* to be both moving and challenging. The film functions well as an insight into British colonial history in Sierra Leone, exploring in depth the racism and violence of this period.

The arc of this research becomes more complex and ultimately more intriguing, in exploring the political and emotional legacy this colonial history has left for both the author and the audience. Downumt's cautious and sensitive footsteps are in marked contrast to the unquestioning colonial footsteps of his grandfather.

The film successfully uses various reflexive devices to build a dialogue with the audience. Downumt seems to take as his starting point, the complex processes of memory and autobiography. Within the thesis he quotes Jo Spence and Patricia Holland's idea that, 'Our memory is never fully ours'.

The film embraces the challenges and contradictions of autobiographical form and content. Downumt is exploring an important area for autobiography. This research begins to suggest that when history is processed by memory, it can become fiction. From the opening of the film in which Professor Edward Blyden states, 'I don't believe in autobiography, they're full of lies', it is clear that this is a reflexive text, one in which the author constantly challenges how he can represent and reinvent both personal and political histories.

Reflexivity is used throughout the film to encourage an active viewing experience in which the viewer considers and reevaluates the truth claims of lens-based media. Downumt also asks the audience to consider how they are located in this exploration of class, family, colonial history and memory.

The author states in the beginning of his thesis (Pg 14) that he is trying to bridge in his writing what Alisa Lebow calls, 'the differing rhetorical positions occupied by the autobiographical/and the auto critical'.

The differences between these 'rhetorical positions' are indeed the strength of this research. Later (Page 30) Downumt provides an engaging exploration of 'Critical Autobiography' quoting Morwenna Gritthith's definition of critical autobiography as texts, 'which include attention to politically situated perspectives'.

It is clear that Downumt has developed reflexive techniques and strategies to produce a 'critical autobiography'. I was impressed by the formal devices in the film used to address his own 'politically situated perspectives'. The filmmaker uses various elements to explore the ideological and political repercussions of a white man exploring and documenting black history and culture.

There are several key scenes in which the filmmaker *emphasises* rather than disavows his perspective as an outsider. These scenes explore the moment subject access is

denied and encourage the audience to see the filmmaker's gaze from the perspective of those he is filming. The scene in which the subjects in a photo shop ask Downumt to stop filming, leads both the filmmaker and the audience to consider the complexity of Documentary access and consent. In Downumt's video diary he reflects on this scene and the challenge of his filmic gaze, concluding 'My complacency was challenged'.

I felt there was a good synergy between the thesis and the Practice, particularly in the theoretical analysis of Direct Address and its uses in contemporary media. Downumt's use of Video Diary techniques provides an antidote to what Alisa Lebow refers to as, 'The artless, sincere, direct address video that makes no attempt to deconstruct the subject or allow the subjectivity of the film its full range and complexity' (Pg 151)

The Whited Sepulchre does indeed allow, 'the subjectivity of the film its full range'. Downumt's Practice research avoids complacency in both how the film is constructed and interpreted. Downumt continually expresses doubt and embraces the complexity and at times absurdity of his journey.

Jay Ruby's early critique of Documentary form and history seemed a particularly important starting point for Downumt as he began to explore new modes of collaborative filmmaking from the 70s onwards. Downumt quotes Ruby's analysis of the Western documentary filmmaker's need to, 'document', 'explain' and ultimately 'control' the world. Ruby concludes, 'The documentary film has not been a place where people explored themselves and their own culture' (page 125)

The desire to find ways in which subjects can explore, 'themselves and their own culture', seems to be at the heart of Downumt's continuing development of autobiographical and collaborative filmmaking techniques. Downumt has made an original, powerful and significant contribution to this genre. I would at this stage highly recommend that this candidate pass this PhD examination.

During the Viva I would like to explore further with the candidate his analysis of the following:

- The techniques he used within his practice research to produce a reflexive, and critical autobiography
- The use of Video Diary in the practice research. How does he employ direct address to, 'allow the subjectivity of the film its full range and complexity'?
- The 'Aesthetics of Failure' in autobiographical filmmaking - How is this practice research informed by, but also different from work Paul Arthur refers to as the 'klutz' phenomenon
- The formal and conceptual challenges of 'Domestic Ethnographies', in particular ones, which explore the legacy of absence and loss.

Victoria Mapplebeck - March 2010

Victoria Mapplebeck - 18/3/2010

### Downmunt. Preliminary Report.

This is a project with two outcomes, an autobiographical film and a written commentary on the contexts in which the film was made and then on selected broader questions concerning autobiographical film-making and the 'subjective' dimension of documentary practice.

The film is engaging and provocative, showing considerable competence and imagination throughout. In it, the maker parallels the experiences and travels of his ancestor, 'A.K.' in Sierra Leone, a journey which is both a developing critique of colonialism registered at the 'personal' level and an emerging sense of awkward affinity with the earlier traveler. The film includes sequences of many different kinds, including biographical materials, earlier work by Downmunt and a range of scenes showing the travels in Sierra Leone, involving trips to various locations, interaction with local groups, different kinds of incident and mishap, interviews and also a 'video diary' quietly addressed to camera, shot at night. A number of questions might be asked about particular decisions, both regarding content and style, but the film's achievement is to encourage such questions by its own reflexive design and admitted 'uncertainties'. In addition to the film, access to the diary of 'A.K.' is provided, given an opportunity to consider the account of the earlier journey in detail, and there is short film/video material relating to the main production in various ways.

One of the most attractive qualities of the well-structured written discussion is the open way it works across some of the tensions, and contradictions, currently surrounding both debate about the conditions and possibilities for documentary 'truth' and integrity and the nature of the 'self' in contemporary culture. Having developed a rich and reflective sense of biographical positioning, it places the author/director's own work in the context of a 'postdocumentary' context in which there is continuing commitment to documentary values, including those 'realist' values which follow from indexical relations, but there is also a recognition of the ways in which questions of subjectivity, both of makers and of audiences, complicate matters more than has often been recognized. The practice of making

autobiographical documentaries, it is argued, brings out some of these issues with instructive clarity. Exploratory connections are also made across to famous examples of the dis-alignment between self-identity and the 'otherness' of context, including otherness of class, family and nationality - Lawrence of Arabia, Orwell and Conrad.

At times, the discussion of conflicting positions around the character of the self or around documentary values becomes a little compromised by formulations like 'the more or less coherent self' or the idea of 'relatively uncomplicated projection', where a hedging of bets rather than a thorough working through of the contested issues seems to occur. However, these moments can also be read as part of the 'frank' tone of uncertainty which provides an intended part of the whole research design.

There are many points throughout the written account where further questions, of clarification or elaboration, might be asked of a point made or a particular phrasing. Some of these involve the ways in which particular theoretical positions, cited in the text, are put to work. Winston, Lebow, Hirsch, Gaines Rascoli and Juhasz are the main names here but just a small selection of queries would be sufficient to bring the ideas out more fully.

Following successful response to viva questioning, I think it is very likely indeed that an award will be recommended, possibly with minor revisions to the dissertation.

There are a small number of typos and I will bring along a list.

Sharon 5 March 2010