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The Cinematic Representation of Memory in the Autobiographical Documentary

Conference Paper · January 2013

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The Border Crossing: the Cinematic Representation of Memory in the Autobiographical Documentary

In this article I explore the cinematic representation of memory, trauma and identity in experimental documentary cinema with reference to my autobiographical documentary film, *The Border Crossing* (2011):ⁱ The film is set in the Basque country and explores my memories of a sexual attack 40 years ago while hitchhiking. It deploys documentary realism in interviews that explore memories of violence, with two Basque women, Aitziber a young Basque nationalist and Maria a middle-aged photographer. It also documents aspects of Maria's daily life and contains extensive images of signifiers of the ongoing nationalist struggle in shots of political posters and demonstrations in support of Basque prisoners.ⁱⁱ The film combines this realist strategy with performativity in the enactment of my younger self and in voice-overs.

In recent years there is general awareness of a growth in autobiographical documentary filmmaking, films that place a filmmaker at the heart of their work. Most of these films deal centrally with the filmmaker's difficult life, often within their family and other intimate personal relationships, in an effort to discover and represent their contested sense of identity. However, in this article I will argue that there are broader possibilities for autobiographical filmmaking, drawing on the work of Alisa Lebow, Jim Lane and Janet Walker. The questions I will explore in this respect are: How does the filmmaker negotiate the representation of subjectivities when including autobiography within a film? How does the placing of the autobiographical self in the

work complicate how the film represents, and refers to, the real world? Further, in relation to my film, *The Border Crossing* what form may be utilised when attempting to specifically represent autobiographical memories of traumatic events? Finally, with reference to my methodology in the representation of memory in autobiography, I refer to David MacDougall (2006), who notes that: “the encounter with visual images demands more of us than the mental facility that language has given us. There is a specificity and obduracy to images that defies our accustomed habits of translation and summation...if we are to gain new knowledge from using images, it will come in other forms and by different means.”ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore it is not by talking or writing alone that I am able to deal with these problems within the world of the film to solve them, but through working on the film itself with its complex structure of sound, image and temporality.

Many influential theorists and filmmakers have viewed the autobiographical documentary film as problematic because, as Michael Renov (2004) notes: “the domain of non-fiction was typically fuelled by a concern for objectivity, a belief that what was seen and heard must retain its integrity as a plausible slice of the social world. How else to persuade viewers to invest belief, to produce ‘visible evidence’ and even induce social action?”^{iv} Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, the Maysles brothers and the proponents of direct cinema, including Frederick Wiseman, shunned an exploration of subjectivity in their documentary films in an elusive search for objectivity. Nevertheless, reflexive strategies did appear in documentary cinema in America and elsewhere, partly as an oppositional response to this claimed verisimilitude of documentary realism. Many of these filmmakers are, as Roxana Waterson (2007) notes, exploring their own subjectivities through cinematic

representation, but are also “engaged in a courageous personal quest to break officially imposed silences.”^v

Examples of autobiographical films produced over the last two decades that utilise reflexivity, not to eradicate the real but to complicate referential claims include: Rea Tajiri’s *History and Memory* (1991) that explores the representation of Tajiri’s Japanese-American mother’s internment in the USA during WWII through Tajiri’s post-memories of this event;^{vi} Michelle Citron’s *Daughter Rite* (1998), an exploration of the difficult relationships between mothers and daughters, that deploys faux documentary of female siblings placed alongside extensively reworked home movie autobiographical footage of Citron as a child with her sister and mother;^{vii} Carol Morley’s autobiographical film *The Alcohol Years* (2000), centred around her early life in Manchester in the 1980s, and her participation in a rich period of pop-music history;^{viii} Tony Dowmunt’s *A Whited Sepulchre* (2009) that articulates his own position as a white ‘Englishman’ travelling in Sierra Leone, alongside an investigation of what might have led his great grandfather to embrace the racism underpinning British colonial rule in that country.^{ix}

An important component therefore, of the exploration of autobiography in documentary cinema, is the utilisation of reflexivity as a deliberate filmic strategy in order to demystify the filmmaking process, thus drawing attention to the ideological position of the film itself and also that of the filmmaker. As Janet Walker (2003) points out, these works breach the normal standards of objective documentary filmmaking by incorporating fictional and personal elements, but within that breach, “they discover new truths about the correlation between the objective mode of

documentary production and mainstream history and [...] the potential of experimental documentary for historical understanding.”^x On a formal level therefore, these types of films allow an extension of the possibilities for documentary cinema to represent realities. Autobiography brings one a step closer to an acknowledgement that the exploration of subjectivity and reflexivity in documentary films may provide additional rich possibilities for the cultural exploration of the social world than is allowed solely through documentary realism.

In *The Border Crossing*, I deploy a similar methodology, to the films I have referred to above, to utilise and locate my own experience of violence in order to explore the cinematic representation of traumatic memory and identity. The knowledge and experience of my own subjective memories provided a rich source of direct material to draw upon in devising strategies for this representation. Walter Benjamin (1979) provided a framework for the methodology in my use of autobiography when he notes:

“He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging [...] he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images [...] that stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector’s gallery—in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding.”^{xi}

Inscribing a mediation of my subjective experience within *The Border Crossing* enabled me to act freely in developing strategies to call upon as a filmmaker, with the overall aim of representing traumatic memory and violence. In addition in this

respect Alisa Lebow (2008) usefully 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 interpolated into the body of (cultural) knowledge we think of as our (contested) self? ^{xii} However, drawing upon our ‘cultural ghosts’ to represent my contested self, necessitates a measure of personal emotional distancing that may be translated through the filmic strategies of articulating personal trauma. Achieving the emotional distance to enable me to represent my own history and memories of my own traumatic event took many years but this period of time assisted me to reflect on the nature of trauma and the difficulties of mediating it through cinematic language.

Articulating an ‘authentic’ cinematic representation of memories of the past poses particular problems for the filmmaker. Individual memories are central components of our inner worlds and provide us with the sense of our individual and communal identity. Memories may be perceived as effected by our visual, aural and sensory inner worlds. Their perception in our interior world is subjective and takes different forms. A memory may sometimes appear to us as fixed, resembling an image of a frozen moment in time. Other memories appear fragmented and unreliable, containing significant elisions in time or place and they may continually change in form and sensation. Memories may disappear from our view altogether or reappear, seemingly unbidden, or as a result of the effect of external forces. Representing subjectivities of memory is complicated by the knowledge that individual memory is cinematically unrepresentable via literal digital or analogue filmic means. ‘Memory’ cannot be seized and brought in front of the camera to be filmed. Further, every time we

‘remember’ an event, an image, sound, or a sensation from the past, we ‘remember’ in the present: “In the process of memory [...] the ‘now’ is as important as the ‘then’ . Memory is a relationship between pasts and a particular present.” (Clare and Johnson 2000).^{xiii}

Complicating the representation of memory further in *The Border Crossing* is the additional mediation of autobiographical memories of events that have occurred in the past. This is a mode of mediation distinct in its *primacy* of subjectivity. The problems of autobiographical representation of memory in documentary cinema are further complicated in *The Border Crossing* by the articulation of memories that are centred on trauma and violence. In her analysis of memory and trauma Cathy Caruth (1996) draws on the work of Freud to note that: “*trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind.” [emphasis in the original]. She also notes that the traumatic experience “is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs”.^{xiv} It is the fact of the incomprehensibility of the violent event that haunts the victim and leads to its non-assimilation through direct recall. The representation of memories of trauma in documentary cinema cannot therefore avoid an acknowledgement of the incomprehensibility of the violent event alongside, and in addition, to the acknowledgement of the unreliability of all subjective memories. Caruth cites Freud to support her argument that due to the non-assimilation of the original experience: “historical memory [...] is always a matter of distortion, a filtering of the original event through the fictions of traumatic repression, which makes the event available at best indirectly.” (ibid. 15-16). Caruth refers to the strategy deployed in Resnais’ film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1950): “it is through the fictional story, not *about* Hiroshima but taking place at its *site*, that Resnais and Duras believe such historical specificity is

conveyed [...] the interest of *Hiroshima mon amour* lies in how it explores the possibility of a faithful history in the very indirectness of its telling.” (ibid. 27).^{xv} Whilst *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is a fiction film and its indexical link to actuality is conveyed elliptically via its narrative and in documentary archive footage of the affects of the nuclear explosion at Hiroshima in 1945 at the start of the film, its filmic strategy draws parallels with the strategies deployed in *The Border Crossing*. The methodology deployed in *The Border Crossing* recognises the multiple problems of representation that are outlined above. It utilises a number of distinct strategies to represent subjectivities that include trauma. At first sight some of the strategies may appear unusual in their deployment *together* within a single experimental documentary film. However as will become clear they create together a synergy of language that informs and enriches the filmic language of the film.

The Border Crossing is located at the site of the traumatic event and articulates its exploration of the past through indirect forms of mediated representation, performativity and enaction. It reprises the strategy of historical specificity deployed by *Hiroshima Mon Amour* in the creation of a direct indexical link to the site of the trauma and tells the story indirectly. It explores the fragility of remembering and forgetting and the non-assimilation of traumatic experience in a complex layering of voice-overs that constantly make reference to ‘my’ unexplained desire to locate the exact site of the border crossing. However, the film represents an autobiographical event not a fictional one, the film maintains a strong indexical link to actuality. As Susannah Radstone argues: “Memory work does not reduce memory to fiction, to dream, or to poetry, for instance. Memories, that is, continue to be memories, and it their relation to lived historical experience that constitutes their specificity.”

(Radstone, 2003).^{xvi} The film takes into account that the articulation of the past must take place in the present, and thus seeks to recreate the past rather than recapture it. As Naomi Green (2000) notes: “Marked by its ‘distance’ from history, [...] memory seeks less to recapture the past than to re-create it; it wants not to confront the ghosts of history but rather to establish a place where they may flourish forever”.^{xvii} Therefore my filmic strategy is to “emphasize not the link between past and present but, instead, the absolute discontinuity” (ibid). Creating a film that consisted only of re-enactment was not adequate for my purposes in representing memory in autobiography. A fictional strategy necessitates the creation of a *mise en scène* that either *appears* authentic to the period or is deliberately theatrical and modern day. Therefore complete performativity deflects attention *away* from actuality in the representation of non-fictional memory.

Two distinct and separate filmic strategies, performative enactment and documentary realism are realised. They do not create distinct binary oppositions but instead underpin one another to create dialectical relationships of themes. In the performative element, a girl, a non-professional actor, chosen for her likeness to myself at her age, represents my younger self.^{xviii} Stella Bruzzi (2006) points to the usefulness of performativity as a filmic strategy where realism is insufficient, arguing that: “the performative documentary uses performance within a non-fiction context to draw attention to the *impossibilities* of authentic documentary representation. The performative element within the framework of non-fiction is thereby an *alienating, distancing device*, not one which actively promotes identification and a straightforward response to a film’s content”(my emphasis).^{xix} In *The Border*

Crossing the spectator is thus enabled to reflect on the themes of memory and violence raised by the film and participate in the construction of identification.

In addition, reflexivity is at the heart of the making of all autobiographical documentaries. Reflexivity heightens our awareness that *The Border Crossing* is a filmic construct, because in addition to the depiction of my own self as a subject of the film, I am also the filmmaker. The film draws the spectator's attention to this reflexivity in its representation of memory at various junctures in the film. For example, during sequential shots of the girl walking through city streets the film is interrupted by a black screen and my voice-over remarks: "I lose sight of myself at this point. Not until I reach the docks and the railway do I become visible again to myself in my mind's eye." This draws the spectator momentarily away from the diegetic world of the film to a reflection on its construction and its representation of unreliable memory. The film resumes the sequential shots of the girl in a city street but in a different location to the previous sequence. This conveys a different, though non-specified, temporal point. Catherine Russell (1999) believes that these three layers of voices, the "speaker [*in voice-over*] seer and seen",^{xx} add richness and diversity to the work of the autobiographical filmmaker, and notes that: "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". (ibid).

In *The Border Crossing* I therefore constructed an interweaved montage of voiced memories, voices in the present and fictional enactment. Voice-overs describe the girl's journey and reflect on the fragility of memory and the affects of violence and loss. These sometimes appear to bind with the enactment on screen. At other times

the voice-over describes memories of events, at an unspecified time and place, that, it says, are *prompted* by the images on the screen, evoking a fictionalized impression of the images themselves enabling memories to be recalled. Through the separation of the voice from the image a thematic relationship is created, not a narrative one, that is not fully explained, one that is resistant to definitive interpretation and referencing. The displacement of readability through a lack of synchrony of voice and image and the references to wider unexplained memories shakes the spectator's view of complete authenticity and foregrounds the film's reflexive construction. The strategy also allows the possibility of a reflection on the nature of past events and the fragile, fragmented and unreliable construction of memory and identity. The use of performativity in *The Border Crossing*, thus creates a useful method for discourse around the cinematic representation of subjectivities towards a metaphorical representation of past and present. It allows the camera and microphone to record an impressionistic landscape of sound and image to build a mosaic of exterior space that merges with and informs an imagined space of the past to occupy the fertile space between documentary realism and fictional enactment.

The performative enactment is further complicated by the use of documentary realist strategies. In documentary films realist strategies generally represent events as they unfold in the present although characters may recall to camera events that took place in the past. There may also be voice-over or a text that refers to events in the past. In the realist element of *The Border Crossing* my voice describes my encounters and growing fascination with two women, Aitziber and Maria, who have suffered from the continuing effects of violence. Over shots of Maria taking photographs in a park my voice introduces her: "I have met Maria, she is my age. If I'd stayed all those years

ago her story might have been mine.” Later in the film my voice-over introduces Aitziber with the remark: “I’m drawn to Aitziber, who I have met on the demonstration. She spent 5 years in a Spanish prison. I recognize in her the fragility of someone whose inner world is scarred by violence.” Aitziber talks, in close up, directly to camera, offering a detailed narrative of imprisonment and sexual torture at the hands of the Spanish State.

As I point out above the juxtaposition of enactment and realism may appear to be in contradiction to the preconceived idea of what a documentary film looks and sounds like. However, in his work on the autobiographical documentary, Jim Lane (2002) points out that, “autobiographical documentaries have revealed an array of formal possibilities [...] that have changed our attitudes about what a documentary should look and sound like.”^{xxi} With the utilisation of my autobiographical voice to introduce the realist sequences, I bring into the diegetic world of the film, characters and events that might not immediately appear to be contiguous with the cinematic world created through enactment. The utilisation of enactment and realism creates layers of meaning that are richer in meaning than would otherwise be possible through the utilisation of a single one of these strategies. Enactment does not eradicate the real but complicates it. Within the filmic discourse therefore, I am able to ask questions of Maria and Aitziber in my role as the filmmaker engaging with documentary realism and the filmmaker/subject of my own narrative of memory and identity. Lane argues that the representation of the self in film complicates how non-fiction films represent and make reference to the world and therefore, “autobiographical documentaries use reflexivity not to eradicate the real as much as to complicate referential claims.” (ibid 17-18).

Through the utilisation of my self as a filmmaker and as subject of the film with my vocalised interests and preoccupations, I may incorporate any type of seemingly disparate stylistic material into the film. Thus in *The Border Crossing* the utilisation of the girl as a character representing my younger self is not at odds with the formal stylistic strategies of documentary realism present in the rest of the film. The representation of my history and self in this work has enabled me to explore the representation of trauma and memory in the contrasting subjectivities of my self with the selves of others and to delve deeper into the representation of history and violence in the Basque country. Mica Nava (1992) argues usefully, in the introduction to her book, *Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism*, that this ‘kind of work’ always emerges from the author’s embeddedness in a specific configuration of inextricably intertwined historical, cultural and psychic narratives.^{xxii}

In regarding myself therefore, as a contested self, with a fragmented sense of identity, embedded in a specific configuration of historical, cultural and psychic narratives, I have made choices about which aspects of my identity I have included in *The Border Crossing*. The mode of representation for my autobiography is complicated by trauma. I am not representing just any autobiographical event in my life but specifically one of violent trauma. The elisions of memory in trauma and its non-assimilability will, and must, affect the way in which I choose to represent my self in the diegesis. Janet Staiger (1996) in her article *Cinematic Shots* discusses the impossibility of representing trauma in more traditional linear narratives because, she says, it leads inevitably to a fetishism of the event. She argues that, because it tries to become a substitute narrative, trying to fill in “for the lack of an ability to describe or

explain the events” (ibid 40) as I have discussed above, it leads to the narrative undoing the “process of mourning for the loss of explanation.” (ibid). She argues that therefore only “anti-narrative non stories of the literary (post) modernist kind are able to represent such traumatic events; the anti-narrative form of representation is not totalizing and permits mourning to occur.” (ibid).^{xxiii}

In *The Border Crossing* I do not represent the sexual attack. There is a growing anticipation of violence through much of the film in the voice-over and through the repeated shots of an unseen man driving a car at night through the rain. In the final sequence the meeting of the unseen man and the girl is implied but not specified. The sequence is set at a border crossing in shots of the girl as she sits waiting for a lift. Several cars go by without stopping, until a white car passes in front of her in the foreground close to the camera and then leaves the frame. The girl gets up and also leaves frame, in the same direction as the car, her footsteps continuing on the soundtrack, until the slam of a car door is heard off-screen. The car returns into shot, its occupants unseen and drives out of sight. However, in the next sequence the girl enters a hotel room alone. Through this method of narrative elision I avoid the possibility of fetishising the representation of trauma. Nevertheless, the absence of enactment of the attack, anticipated and hinted at throughout the film’s diegesis, does not elide it from reconstruction in the imagination of the spectator.

In conclusion, I have explored how the filmmaker negotiates the representation of subjectivities when including autobiography within a film to bring one closer to an acknowledgement that the exploration of subjectivity and reflexivity provide rich possibilities for the cultural exploration of the social world. The placing of the

autobiographical self in the work complicates and enhances how the film represents, and refers to, the real world. I have shown that by utilising autobiography and performativity in *The Border Crossing* I have acknowledged the unreliability of memories of traumatic events and avoided the fetishisation of trauma in representing them. Finally, I have demonstrated that by deploying filmic strategies of documentary realism alongside performativity there are rich possibilities in the development of cinematic language in representing memory and autobiography in experimental documentary cinema.

ⁱ Daniels, Jill. *The Border Crossing* <http://www.jilldanielsfilms.com/border.html>

ⁱⁱ In November 2011, after the film was completed, the ETA nationalist leadership announced its commitment to end armed struggle.

ⁱⁱⁱ MacDougall, David. 2006. *The Corporeal Image: film, ethnography, and the senses*. Princeton University Press. p. 2.

^{iv} Renov, Michael. 2004. *The Subject of Documentary*. University of Minnesota Press. pp.XVII.

^v Waterson, Roxana. 2007.. 'Trajectories of Memory: Documentary Film and the Transmission of Testimony' in *Anthropology Today*. Vol 18. No. 1. Routledge. p.51.

^{vi} Tajiri, Rea. 1991. *History and Memory*. USA,

^{vii} Citron, Michelle. 1998. *Daughter Rite*. USA

^{viii} Morley, Carol. 2000. *The Alcohol Years*. UK.

^{ix} Dowmunt, Tony. 2009. *A Whited Sepulchre*. Thesis submitted for the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) Examination. Goldsmiths, University of London.

^x Walter, Janet. 2003. *Trauma Cinema*. University of California. p.21.

^{xi} Benjamin, Walter. 1979. 'Berlin Chronicle' in *One Way Street and other Writings*. London: New Left Books. [1932]. p.314.

^{xii} Lebow, Alisa. 2008. *First Person Jewish*. Visible Evidence Series, Volume 22. Minneapolis. pp.141-42.

^{xiii} Clare, M & Johnson, R. 2000, 'Method in our Madness: identity and power in a memory work method' in Radstone, Susannah (ed) *Memory and Methodology*. Berg. p.199

^{xiv} Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press. pp. 3 & 5.

^{xv} Resnais, Alain. *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. 1959. France. It is a fiction film set in Hiroshima, Japan, the site of the atomic bomb deployed by the USA that effectively ended WWII. The film is a love story between a French woman and a Japanese man with an elliptical structure that refers to that event.

^{xvi} Radstone, Susannah. 2000. 'Working with Memory: an Introduction' in *Memory and Methodology*. Radstone, Susannah (ed). Berg. p.11.

^{xvii} Greene, Naomi. 2000. 'Empire as Myth and Memory' in *The Historical Film*. Landy, Marcia (ed). Great Britain: The Athlone Press. p. 247.

^{xviii} In the pre-credit sequence my voice-over points out that Sian had appeared in my earlier documentary film *Small Town Girl*, 2007, a longitudinal study of 3 adolescent girls in the UK. I refer to this prior relationship only in the pre-credit sequence.

^{xix} Bruzzi, Stella. 2006. 'The Performative Documentary' in *New Documentary*, ed. Bruzzi, Stella. Routledge. pp.185-86.

^{xx} Russell, Catherine. 1999. *Experimental Ethnography: the work of film in the age of video*. Durham & London: Duke University Press. p.277.

^{xxi} Lane, Jim. 2002. *Autobiographical Documentary in America*, University of Wisconsin Press. p.4.

^{xxii} Nava, Mica 1992. *Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism*, London: Sage. p.1.

^{xxiii} Staiger, Janet. 1996. 'Cinematic Shots'. In Sobchack, Vivian (ed) *The Persistence of History: cinema, television, and the modern event*. UK: Routledge. p.40.

