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**University of Southampton**

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Film Studies

**Performing Identity in Contemporary Biographical Documentary**

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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# University of Southampton

## Abstract

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

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Performing Identity in Contemporary Biographical Documentary

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My thesis addresses the role performance plays in contemporary documentary. I focus on case studies where performance techniques (reconstruction, use of actors) are used and my discussion analyses the distinctive effects that are created. A distinction is made between performance and performative, as defined by J.L. Austin, Judith Butler, Stella Bruzzi, et al., and this is then connected to Erving Goffman's work on social performance to argue that numerous documentaries actively engage with how identity is socially constructed. My aim is to highlight that implementing elements of performance into non-fiction film is a technique used by the filmmaker to include the spectator in negotiations of meaning in such films, centring on definitions of identity and how we all perform in everyday life. Historically, documentary film has been theorised in terms of its objectivity and that any use of fictional techniques undermines its main purpose. My research challenges this longstanding definition and acknowledges that the use of a performative visual framework can provide an audience with a wider understanding of how they define, shape and perform their various 'selves.' Chapter topics include 'Autobiography', 'Sports and Music Documentaries', and 'LGBTQ+ Documentaries'.

# Table of Contents

<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Table of Figures .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction: Performance and the Performative in Documentary.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Critical Definitions of Documentary.....	4
1.2 Historical Overview .....	16
1.3 Performance and Performative.....	27
1.4 Biography and Autobiography .....	37
1.5 Methodology .....	42
1.6 Chapter Outline .....	43
<b>Chapter 2 Autobiography .....</b>	<b>49</b>
2.1 A Plurality of Selves .....	59
2.2 Internal/External, Private/Public Spaces.....	71
<b>Chapter 3 Performance in Sports and Music Documentaries.....</b>	<b>83</b>
3.1 Different Types of Performance.....	84
3.2 Mediated Bodies and Spectacular Display.....	86
3.3 Performance and Pain.....	94
3.4 Voice, the Body and Identity .....	101
<b>Chapter 4 LGBTQ+ Documentary .....</b>	<b>109</b>
4.1 <i>I Am Divine</i> and <i>Maplethorpe: Look at the Pictures</i> as ‘Camp’ Documentary .....	120
4.2 <i>I Am Divine</i> and <i>Maplethorpe: Look at the Pictures</i> as Performative Documentary .....	126
4.3 Gay Sensibility and Art Installation Films .....	136
<b>Chapter 5 Reflexive Strategies.....</b>	<b>143</b>
5.1 Voice in Documentary .....	143
5.2 <i>The Arbor</i> .....	147

5.3 <i>Notes on Blindness</i> .....	154
5.4 Animation in <i>Waltz with Bashir</i> .....	157
<b>Chapter 6 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>183</b>

## Table of Figures

Figure 1 Diego Velazquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656, oil on canvas, 318cm x 276cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain p. 55

Figure 2 *Stories We Tell*. dir. by Sarah Polley. National Film Board of Canada, et al. Canada. 2012. p. 55

Figure 3 Film posters for *Senna* (Asif Kapadia, 2010) and *Amy* (Kapadia, 2015) p. 93

Figure 4 Publicity still of Divine via <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/c3/ff/99/c3ff996d01a8f7a66041fb607e8a00a-divine-goddess-october-.jpg> (accessed 06/10/2018) and film still of Divine from *Pink Flamingos* (John Waters, 1972) via <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/101753272802915779/> - (accessed 06/10/2018) p. 120

Figure 5 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self-Portrait*, c1980, photograph, gelatine silver print on paper p. 122

Figure 6 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Joe NYC*, 1978, photograph, Selenium toned gelatine silver print, 19.5 x 19.5 cm p. 126

Figure 7 Left - Robert Mapplethorpe, *Calla Lily*, 1988, platinum print, 47.9 x 48.6 cm, p. 133  
Right - Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ken Moody*, 1983, photograph, Gelatine silver print, 38.5 x 38.7 cm, New York, USA  
Left, *Wildflowers of Manitoba* (Noam Gonick and Luis Jacobs, 2007), right, *Now* (Chantal Akerman, 2015) p. 139

Figure 8



## Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name:	Adam Vaughan
Title of thesis:	Performing Identity in Contemporary Biographical Documentary

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Parts of this work have been published as:

Adam Vaughan, 'Mute Bodies, Disembodied Voices and Blind Spectators: Performativity in *Notes on Blindness*' in *Question Journal*, April 23 (2018),  
<https://www.questionjournal.com/single-post/2018/04/23/Mute-Bodies-Disembodied-Voices-and-Blind-Spectators-Performativity-in-Notes-on-Blindness> - accessed 21/09/18

Signature:		Date:	19/06/19
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In Sarah Polley's complex autobiographical documentary *Stories We Tell* (2012), Polley interviews family members and friends to reveal how we construct narratives and that memory and storytelling are crucial tools at our disposal when we talk about our lives. During the course of the film one of the director's interviewees, her father Michael, makes two intriguing points about his daughter's documentary process. Early on, we see Sarah and her crew setting up a recording session where Michael will sit and read his autobiographical memoir recounting his life with his deceased wife, Sarah's mother. Before the audio recording begins, but while the documentary cameras are rolling, Michael says, "I hope you'll explain to me some time what all this is that you're trying to do - the two cameras and me, recording it visually. I mean, it's not the normal way of doing it, is it?" Certainly, if this were just a recording session with the aim of turning Michael's memoir into an audio CD or other sound document then the presence of cameras would seem redundant. However, as Sarah then explains to Michael, it is a documentary and, furthermore, an "interrogation process". The visual element is used to question other participants' perception of the past. So, as well as being trained on Michael reading his memoir, the camera captures Sarah's reactions in the technical booth. The film proceeds with stories from other family members and a narrative is formed about how Sarah's parents got together and Sarah and her siblings' upbringing.

We return throughout the course of the film to the recording booth when Michael's reading relates to events we hear from other interviewees. Here, Sarah adds emphasis to specific moments by interrupting her father and asking him to repeat a line, presumably under the auspices that he stuttered or was unclear. However, the purpose is to add poignancy or to throw a statement into stark relief based on other things we have heard over the course of the film. Even for a documentary we might say that this setup is unusual. Talking head interviews, to be found throughout the rest of the film, are a staple tradition of certain styles of documentary filmmaking but recording a recording of spoken word and the self-reflexive tone that is created is less common.

Michael's second comment, which occurs towards the end of *Stories We Tell*, is emblematic of much critical discussion about documentary filmmaking in the 1980s and 1990s and continues today. His observations are worth quoting at length:

You realise, when you've finished all this, you'll have about six hours of stuff and you'll decide what you want out of it. It'll be exactly like the story. Each one of us will pick out – if any of us were trying to edit it – and decide what we wanted to keep. It would be the same farcical kind of theatrical exercise that we're all involved in. "Oh. I want to keep that", "it's rubbish that". That's an enormously different scene from simply doing an interview straight and never doing any editing of it whatsoever but letting it run as it is. That would've been at least as close to truth as you can get, whereas your editing of this will turn this into something completely different.

The 'something completely different' to which Michael refers is the subjective rendering of events where every framing choice, camera movement and edit reflects the director's view of how something happened, which might differ greatly from what 'actually' happened in front of the camera. Instead, the aesthetic and compositional decisions of the person behind the camera may serve to create additional meaning or favour a preferred reading of a documentary by an audience. For Michael, whether or not he believes the documentary form ever capable of being so, there is an assumption that nonfiction should eschew any tendency to fictionalise. Instead, documentary should aim to capture the world 'as it really is'.

Michael's sentiments find their critical echo in the writing of prominent documentary theorist, Bill Nichols. In his 1991 book, *Representing Reality*, Nichols defines documentary in terms of the relationship between image and reality:

The elevation provided by metaphor, the sense of remove, is drained away as special properties of photographic film and magnetic tape hold the documentary image to the exact shapes and contours, patterns and practices, of the historical world. We expect to apply a distinct form of literalism (or realism) to documentary. We are less engaged by fictional characters and their destiny than by social actors and destiny itself (or social praxis). We prepare ourselves not to comprehend a story but to grasp an argument. We do so in relation to sounds and images that retain a distinct bond to the world we all share.<sup>1</sup>

For Nichols, documentary has a responsibility to represent the historical world accurately and this is what distinguishes the nonfiction form from fiction film. Therefore, documentaries that utilise reconstruction, special effects, subjective voice or performance techniques are generally considered as being less worthwhile. Consequently, discussion is frequently limited to the effects of using performance techniques on the truth claims of the film as a whole, such that a reconstruction with actors or any stylistic flourish of camerawork is seen to undermine the veracity of the film's argument. My research will seek to move away from this narrow evaluation of the documentary form and instead acknowledge that the use of performance techniques in

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Nichols, 'The Domain of Documentary' in *Representing Reality* (Indianapolis: Bloomington, 1991), p.5

biographical documentary films is a specific way of engaging with audiences and issues of how we represent identity in contemporary society. *Stories We Tell* is an intriguing case-in-point.

My key research questions are as follows: what role does performance play in contemporary biographical documentaries, that is, nonfiction films with a single human subject? What impact do performance elements have on the construction and/or definition of the subject's identity? Consequently, how does this affect the film spectator's reading of the documentary? And, finally, to what extent can one argue that the style of representation in the majority of biographical documentaries produced in the last ten years has been influenced by the representation of performance in contemporary society and mass media forms? These questions will direct and shape discussion in the following chapters, a debate that interrogates biographical film texts in new and innovative ways.

In *Stories We Tell*, which will be discussed at greater length in chapter one, Polley complicates any clear sense of stable identity. She cleverly inserts authentic-looking grainy home-movie footage of family dinners, excursions and holidays that is actually staged and performed by actors who look remarkably similar to the real figures they portray. The spectator would be forgiven for confusing reality with artifice due to the fact that Polley intercuts these recreations with genuine archival footage without any signposting. The effect created is equally playful, reflexive, and situates the spectator in a complex interplay of the performance of various identities. This is especially true as it is revealed halfway through the documentary that Michael is not Sarah's biological father due to her mother's affair with a film producer when away on a theatre job.

These issues will be returned to in the next chapter on autobiographical films. However, for now, I will outline what the rest of the introduction will aim to do. Firstly, my introduction will include a literature review, which will map the field of documentary studies and how my research fits into and builds upon existing critical discussions. This assessment of a wide range of critical voices in documentary studies will explain how the form has been defined and discussed heretofore. These can be divided into different categories. First there are critics like Erik Barnouw and the early criticism by Nichols who favour a definition of documentary that foregrounds its difference to the fiction form, its aim to show rather than invent. Elsewhere, there are those academics – such as the Nichols of *Blurred Boundaries* and Michael Renov – who highlight the cross-fertilisation of documentary and fiction filmmaking. And then there are those, like Stella Bruzzi, who vociferously dispute the claims of Nichols et al. by stating that 'documentaries are performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable and informed by issues of performance and performativity'.<sup>2</sup> With such an array of critical viewpoints on offer, it is important for me in this section to clarify where

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<sup>2</sup> Stella Bruzzi, 'Introduction' in *New Documentary: Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2013), p.1

my research fits into this discursive battleground and, more crucially, to explain that my project is an original and invigorating way of analysing contemporary documentary. Following on from the literature review, I will provide an historical overview of how performance has figured in documentaries throughout its rich past in order to contextualise the case-study films I will discuss within the following chapters.

As can be seen in the above quote from Stella Bruzzi, my central focus on performance does not have one meaning. ‘Performance’ and the ‘performative’ are very different concepts and, by referencing the work of J.L. Austin, Judith Butler, Erving Goffman and others, I will define how I will be using these terms. The same is true of ‘biography’ and ‘autobiography’ and an explanation of their historical, literary contexts is necessary before proceeding. I will finish by describing my methodological approach, explaining why I have chosen textual analysis as my primary means of understanding the case-study films; why I have chosen these particular films; and why these documentaries from this specific timeframe. I will conclude with a detailed chapter outline of the project which will include the aims and key questions each section will raise.

## 1.1 Critical Definitions of Documentary

What is a documentary? One easy and traditional answer is: not a movie. Or at least not a movie like *Star Wars* is a movie. Except when it is a theatrical movie, like *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), which broke all box-office records for a documentary[...]A simple answer might be: a movie about real life. And that is precisely the problem; documentaries are about real life; they are not real life. They are not even windows onto real life. They are portraits of real life, using real life as their raw material, constructed by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what story to tell to whom, and for what purpose. You might then say: a movie that does its best to represent real life and that doesn’t manipulate it. And yet, there is no way to make a film without manipulating the information.<sup>3</sup>

Patricia Aufderheide succinctly identifies many of the problems critics and audiences encounter when trying to define what a documentary actually is. Her, one assumes, tongue-in-cheek assessment raises issues that have dogged documentary criticism for decades and continue today.

The idea of documentary being ‘not a movie’, or at least different to the predominant fiction film, is often how critics define the nonfiction form – as what it is not. Many people might categorise

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia Aufderheide, ‘Defining the Documentary’ in *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.1-2

documentary as 'serious' or 'not fun' based on their school days being forced to watch dry geographical lectures on tectonic plates and the anatomy of volcanoes, but this is a view that is challenged by so much documentary output which displays the world in which we live through the use of innovative and (I argue) performance-based strategies. Then there is the continued debate over documentary's desire to capture real life and the struggles in academic circles to refute such claims based on the greater or lesser degree of indexicality the documentary image has to the world. Central to this debate is the filmmaker's role in shaping the documentary and the subjective decisions that are made which, supposedly, destroy the film's objectivity.

As will become clear in the following pages, a straightforward definition of documentary is difficult to come by. Instead, I wish to demonstrate the various voices of dissent and differing viewpoints of what a documentary is from scholars of nonfiction and where my own research into performance within biographical documentary is situated in these discussions. Documentary is a fluid and heterogeneous form of filmmaking which has, in critical attempts to pin it down to a basic definition, often been classified too narrowly. We have reached a point now where there is such a diverse output of documentary forms in film and also on television that definitions need to be re-evaluated and developed. But we must begin with the definitions that have gone before.

A useful starting point is Bill Nichols, whose critical definition of documentary has evolved over the course of his academic career. Starting in 1991 with *Representing Reality*, Nichols seeks to define and include documentary within what he terms 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, they can effect action and entail consequences...Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent. Through them power exerts itself. Through them, things are made to happen. They are the vehicles of domination and conscience, power and knowledge, desire and will.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Nichols assumes documentary's objective is to depict events in the historical world. However, he explains that documentary is unable to sit easily within the discourses of sobriety because of its relationship with fiction film. They each share use of the cinematic apparatus, the camera. Nichols expands that '*all* photographic and motion picture images made according to the prevailing conventions that allow light reflected from physical objects to be registered on photosensitive film or videotape will exhibit a distinctive bond between image and object' and subsequently the 'bond of image to object will not, therefore, certify the historical status of the

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Nichols, 'The Domain of Documentary' in *Representing Reality* (Indianapolis: Bloomington, 1991), p.3

object nor the credibility of an argument'.<sup>5</sup> A fiction film that has had special effects and pyrotechnics added or that features an actor or actress performing a role, for Nichols, undermines documentary's position amongst the other discourses and creates a clear demarcation between the two modes of filmmaking. One sheds light on the world, the other invents aspects of this world.

Nichols further argues:

The most fundamental difference between expectations prompted by narrative fiction and by documentary lies in the status of the text in relation to the historical world. This has two levels. Cues within the text and assumptions based on past experience prompt us to infer that the images we see (and many of the sounds we hear) had their origin in the historical world. Technically, this means that the projected sequence of images, what occurred in front of the camera (the profilmic event), and the historical referent are taken to be congruent with one another. The image is the referent projected onto a screen. In documentary we often begin by assuming that the intermediary stage – that which occurred in front of the camera – remains identical to the actual event that we could have ourselves witnessed in the historical world...In many documentaries we may modify this assumption to take account of how the presence of the camera and filmmaker inflects events they appear to record. This necessitates speculation since what might have happened were the camera not there cannot be ascertained. Though inconclusive, the very dynamic of engaging in such conjecture distinguishes a documentary mode of engagement for the viewer.<sup>6</sup>

The implication here is that documentary filmmakers capture events from the historical world on camera without any need for set-up and that fiction filmmakers stage and create events. As such, Nichols identifies objectivity as a key representational 'ally' of the documentary process.<sup>7</sup> From this critical vantage point, Nichols posits four modes of representation: expository; observational; interactive; and reflexive.<sup>8</sup>

According to Nichols, the expository mode highlights an 'impression of objectivity and of well substantiated judgment' which features direct address to the viewer through voiceover and/or titles in order to 'advance an argument about the historical world'.<sup>9</sup> The clearest example of this mode of documentary is *The March of Time* series of newsreels. Running from the mid-1930s until 1951 and sponsored by Time-Life-Fortune Inc., this series of short films was shown in conjunction

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<sup>5</sup> Nichols, pp.5-6

<sup>6</sup> Nichols, p.25

<sup>7</sup> Nichols, p.30

<sup>8</sup> Nichols, p.32

<sup>9</sup> Nichols, pp.34-35

with the main feature in theatres and reported on contemporary social and political issues with the spectator guided by the authoritative voice of Westbrook Van Voorhis.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Nichols' observational documentary 'stresses the non-intervention of the filmmaker' and thus avoids voiceover narration, intertitles, interviews, non-diegetic music or any other technique that displays explicit interference from a presence behind the camera.<sup>11</sup> Emblematic of this style of documentary filmmaking is the 'direct cinema' movement which predominantly emerged from America in the early 1960s. Key figures from this period included Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker and Albert and David Maysles whose films *Primary* (Drew, 1960), *Monterey Pop* (Pennebaker, 1968) and *Salesman* (Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, 1969), to name a few, sought to demonstrate documentary's ability to simply capture reality as it happened.

The interactive mode, in Nichols' terms, is exemplified by direct cinema's often uneasy affiliation with its other contemporary movement; *cinema vérité*:

Interactive documentary stresses images of testimony or verbal exchange and images of demonstration (images that demonstrate the validity, or possibly, the doubtfulness, of what witnesses state). Textual authority shifts toward the social actors recruited: their comments and responses provide a central part of the film's argument. Various forms of monologue and dialogue (real or apparent) predominate. The mode introduces a sense of partialness, of *situated* presence and *local* knowledge that derives from the actual encounter of filmmaker and other.<sup>12</sup>

This 'encounter' between documentarian and documentary subject is at its most explicit in *cinema vérité*, due to the large part the filmmaker plays onscreen in front of the camera. However, other less overt interactive techniques such as the talking head interview that has become such a mainstay in traditional documentary features can be included in this mode of representation.

Whereas in the interactive mode the focus is on the encounter between filmmaker and subject, in Nichols' reflexive mode the emphasis is placed on the relationship between the filmmaker and viewer. These films engage in a 'meta-commentary' about documentary's ability, or lack thereof, to represent the historical world and, as the name suggests, are highly reflexive in the way they draw attention to the filmmaking process.<sup>13</sup> Some recent examples could include Clio Barnard's

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<sup>10</sup> Betsy A. McLane, 'Institutionalization USA, 1930-1941' in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), pp.96-99

<sup>11</sup> Nichols, p.38

<sup>12</sup> Nichols, p.44

<sup>13</sup> Nichols, pp.56-60

*The Arbor* (2010). Ostensibly a biography of the young British playwright, Andrea Dunbar, Barnard uses actors in the main role and has them lip-synch the testimonies of the people they are playing. The initial discord between image and vocal track encourages the spectator to acknowledge the representational process. A corresponding effect is achieved in Rufus Norris's film adaptation *London Road* (2015). Here Alecky Blythe's verbatim stage musical, originally produced by the National Theatre, features actors speaking and singing the testimonies of residents who lived on the eponymous street in 2006 when five prostitutes were found murdered nearby. In this case, the film's musical conceit and the unaltered speech from the residents (including fillers like "um" and "you know") creates a strange disjunct between the horrific narrative details of the 'Ipswich Ripper' and the associations of the film musical with fantasy, escapism and family-friendly values. As a result of its formal techniques, *London Road* is highlighting the perverse fascination the public, the media and even film audiences have for such stories. Similarly, in *The Missing Picture* (2013), Rithy Panh uses clay figures in tableaux and narration to recount the atrocities carried out by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. Although some archival footage is used, the majority of the film requires the spectator to interpret the historical events through the silent figurines. These issues will be returned to in chapter four, which examines reflexive strategies in contemporary biographical documentaries.

Problematically, Nichols treats these four categories as chronologically developing across the history of documentary filmmaking. However, what is more noteworthy, as far as this thesis is concerned, is how little critical space Nichols gives to those documentaries that are not engaged in the unequivocal capture of objective reality.<sup>14</sup> In other words, films that might use performance techniques or playfully engage the spectator to question that which the documentary presents are given short shrift. I do not think it is wrong to suggest that behind Nichols' commentary is an implicit aversion or distrust of documentaries that might stage action or engage in reflexive performance. I acknowledge that the technological (social media, digital platforms) and the sociocultural sphere of spectatorship has changed greatly since the early 1990s when Nichols was writing. My aim in this thesis is to give documentaries that are structured around complex layers of performance the critical attention that is missing from the writing of Nichols and his contemporaries. Later in his career, as we shall see, Nichols amends his position to include categories of documentary that display elements of performance, but it by no means provides a conclusive account of the potential this documentary variant can accomplish for how spectators participate in the construction of meaning in these films.

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<sup>14</sup> Nichols, p.30

Objectivity also forms part of Erik Barnouw's description of documentary, albeit regarding the impossibility of its ability to unobtrusively record reality:

To be sure, some documentarists claim to be objective – a term that seems to renounce an interpretive role. The claim may be strategic, but is surely meaningless. The documentarist, like any communicator in any medium, makes endless choices. He selects topics, people, vistas, angles, lens, juxtapositions, sounds, words. Each selection is an expression of his point of view, whether he is aware of it or not, whether he acknowledges it or not.<sup>15</sup>

For Barnouw, whenever a documentary filmmaker makes a choice to move the camera a certain way or cut at a particular moment, their subjectivity enters the fray and any claims to objectivity are lost. This sounds a lot like Michael Polley's comments from *Stories We Tell*. Nevertheless Barnouw, to a greater extent than Nichols, posits a dialectic between documentary and fiction filmmaking when he describes 'true documentarists' having a desire to find elements of truth in their images, which to them is 'more meaningful than anything they can invent.'<sup>16</sup>

Likewise, Barry Keith Grant and Jeanette Sloniowski, in their introduction to *Documenting the Documentary*, position documentary in opposition to fiction film when they write about trying to account for the lack of critical discussion on the aesthetics of documentary:

The reason, likely, is the different ontological status of the documentary image, its closer indexical relation to the real— that is, its more intimate connection to the real world, the physical world in which we live. In fiction films, no matter how realistic they may be, some form of "suspension of disbelief" is always operative. By contrast, documentary appeals to us precisely because of its truth claims, whether at the level of fact or image. Because it is the form of cinema that is most closely bound to the real world, to actual personal and collective problems, hopes, and struggles, it is understandable that concrete issues of ethics, politics, and technology (the physical apparatus) would take precedence over the intangibles of aesthetics. Yet as we increasingly garner our news and information about our world— indeed, our very perception and comprehension of it— from the visual media, it is more important than ever to understand the textual strategies by which individual documentaries are organized.<sup>17</sup>

Grant and Sloniowski's description accounts for many of the earlier critical examinations of documentary. These approached documentaries as different from fiction film with regards to its assumed closer link to, and truthful representation of, the historical world by eschewing any

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<sup>15</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) p.287

<sup>16</sup> Barnouw, p.348

<sup>17</sup> Barry Keith Grant & Jeanette Sloniowski (eds.) 'Introduction' in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video* New Edition (Detroit, MI, USA: Wayne State University Press, 2013), p.xxiv

techniques associated with fictional filmmaking. However, another popular framework through which to discuss documentary exists, and it is characterised by an allowance for the blurring of nonfiction and fictional elements.

Nichols amends his position in his later work, *Blurred Boundaries*, where he posits an alternative 'performative' mode of representation for documentary. Here, Nichols is much more willing to accept that some documentary practice draws on traditions of fiction film, such as scripting, staged action (re-enactments) and non-diegetic music. For him this is 'a mode that does not draw our attention to the formal qualities or political context of the film directly so much as deflect our attention from the referential quality of documentary altogether'.<sup>18</sup> This alternative mode of representation fulfils an expressive function of documentary film that was missing from Nichols' earlier work:

Performative documentary, like reflexive documentaries, does not propose a primary object of study beyond itself but instead gives priority to the affective dimensions struck up between ourselves and the text. It proposes a way of being-in-the-world as this world is itself brought into being through the very act of comprehension...Using the "dynamite of a tenth of a second" celebrated by Walter Benjamin, performative documentary burst the contemporary prison world (of what is and what is deemed appropriate, of realism and its documentary logic) so that we can go travelling within a new world of our own creation.<sup>19</sup>

As a result (and as previously highlighted in the examples of *The Arbor* and *The Missing Picture*), the spectator is given a much more significant role in the consumption of these texts, because it is their presumed literacy of the codes and conventions of performance that, I contend, aid in the viewing of contemporary biographical documentary feature films. For Nichols, the effect of this mode is to blur 'yet more dramatically the already imperfect boundary between documentary and fiction'.<sup>20</sup> However, contrary to Nichols' documentary-as-distraction formulation of the performative mode, in the way it 'does not propose a primary object of study', this thesis will argue that performance techniques in documentary films offer a familiar way of viewing for audiences that can be beneficial for filmmakers dealing with complex or problematic subjects and themes. By this I mean that the filmmaker can depict their chosen events on a particular subject in a performative way and/or by using elements of performance (and 'performative' and 'performance' have different meanings, as will be explained later in the introduction) in order to engage the spectator in a way that is familiar to them. So much contemporary factual output,

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<sup>18</sup> Bill Nichols, 'Performing Documentary' in *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.93

<sup>19</sup> Nichols, 'Performing Documentary', p.102

<sup>20</sup> Nichols, p.94

especially on television (i.e. *The X Factor*, *Britain's Got Talent*, *Big Brother*), is organised around particular types of performance with the viewer positioned as a judge to how well these individuals perform. For shows like *The X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent* (and its international variants) this also involves a literal stage and panel of judges whose criteria and comments aid the public at home who to support. In the case of *Big Brother* viewers assess the truthfulness and entertainment-value of an individual and likewise either vote to support or evict them. In these examples, belief in a person's identity is treated as a commodity. The value we attach to the individual is usually determined by how 'true' or 'real' we believe them to be.

Michael Renov goes one step further when describing the relationship between documentary and fiction when he says that they are 'enmeshed in one another'<sup>21</sup> with regards to semiotics, narrative and performance:

At the level of the sign, it is the differing historical status of the referent that distinguishes documentary from its fictional counterpart not the formal relations among signifier, signified, and referent. Is the referent a piece of the world, drawn from the domain of lived experience, or, instead, do the people and objects placed before the camera yield to the demands of a creative vision? Narrativity, sometimes assumed to be the sole province of fictional forms, is an expository option for the documentary film that has at times been forcefully exercised...How do we begin to distinguish the documentary performance-for-the-camera of a musician, actor, or politician (...) from that of a fictional counterpart (...)? The ironies and cross-identifications these examples invoke ought to suggest the extent to which fictional and nonfictional categories share key conceptual and discursive characteristics.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, Renov argues that all discursive systems 'are, if not fictional, at least *fictive*' due to their use of 'tropes or rhetorical figures'.<sup>23</sup> 'Every documentary representation depends upon its own detour from the real, through the defiles of the audio-visual signifier'<sup>24</sup>, Renov continues, which, although sympathetic to the possibility of a cross-fertilisation between nonfiction and fiction, implies that as soon as the documentarist invents or chooses to implement any technique associated with fiction filmmaking, the truth of their documentary project is undermined. In the process, Renov proposes four rhetorical or aesthetic functions of documentary practice: to record, reveal, or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyse or interrogate; to express.<sup>25</sup> In each case, they are interpreted based on their 'truth claims' for documentary representation.

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Renov, 'Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction' in *Theorizing Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.2

<sup>22</sup> Renov, p.2

<sup>23</sup> Renov, p.7

<sup>24</sup> Renov, p.7

<sup>25</sup> Renov, p.21

Renov describes the ‘record, reveal or preserve’ function as the most essential across all of documentary history and that its main focus is on ‘the replication of the historical real’.<sup>26</sup> However, he acknowledges that sometimes the documentary filmmaker is not averse to restaging events for the camera to create the impression of revelation (Renov cites Robert Flaherty’s staging of a walrus hunt in *Nanook of the North* [1922]). This results in a mediated representation which distances what we see on the screen from its real-world referent.<sup>27</sup> For his ‘to persuade or promote’ formulation, Renov, citing Nichols, explains that the spectator can be affected by the ethical position or reputation of the filmmaker, emotional scenes and demonstrative strategies, such as graphs, statistics and the like. However, Renov argues that, at its core, documentary persuades us based on its claims to represent a truthful argument.<sup>28</sup> A set of questions forms the basis of Renov’s description of the ‘to analyse or interrogate’ function and similarly contain within them an assumption of documentary’s aim to truthfully record. These are ‘on what basis does the spectator invest belief in the representation, what are the codes which ensure that belief, what material processes are involved in the production of this “spectacle of the real” and to what extent are these processes to be rendered visible or knowable to the spectator?’<sup>29</sup> Finally, ‘to express’, which for Renov remains a largely undervalued and underrepresented function in documentary criticism, is characterised by directorial choices that may draw attention to the constructed nature of the documentary. However, ‘[t]hat a work undertaking some manner of historical documentation renders that representation in a challenging or innovative manner should in no way disqualify it as nonfiction because the question of expressivity is, in all events, a matter of degree.’<sup>30</sup> Previously mentioned examples such as *The Missing Picture* and *The Arbor* would be included in this category as well as the documentaries of Errol Morris (*The Thin Blue Line* [1988] and *Tabloid* [2010]) whose highly expressionistic style of reconstruction becomes imperative to the documentary narrative. Presumably, the degree of which Renov speaks is the amount of constructed material and fictional elements the documentary displays and, therefore, how much the film represents an authentic depiction of reality.

As I have demonstrated here, when critics such as Nichols and Renov seek to define documentary as a blurring of fictional and documentary tropes, it is often the case that their definitions comment upon the former’s effects on the truth of the finished film. But if one accepts the point of view that all documentaries display the creative interpretation of the filmmaker which

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Renov, ‘Toward a Poetics of Documentary’ in *Theorizing Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.25

<sup>27</sup> Renov, pp.25-6

<sup>28</sup> Renov, p.30

<sup>29</sup> Renov, p.31

<sup>30</sup> Renov, p.35

consequently negates their claims to truthful depiction of events and an argument, then the entire documentary impulse, as defined here, is meaningless. So why make them? Surely a definition of documentary that accepts that some documentaries will display styles from fiction film is needed. However, as we shall see, even when academics posit definitions of documentary that not only allow for a blurring between nonfiction and fictional techniques but believe that the central thrust of documentary meaning comes from them being performative, the situation still is reduced to how this effects their claims to the real.

Stella Bruzzi's writing is a reaction against the position taken by Nichols, Barnouw and others. Bruzzi believes that these critics are forever in search of the 'pure documentary', that is, a nonfiction film 'uncontaminated by the subjective vagaries of representation' and that they deem any film that displays features of subjectivity to have failed.<sup>31</sup> It may be a bold claim and one that is difficult to prove, but Bruzzi's alternative formulation of the nonfiction form is incisive nonetheless. Bruzzi's central thesis is that:

[...] the pact between documentary, reality and the documentary spectator is far more straightforward than many theorists have made out: that a documentary will never be reality nor will it erase or invalidate that reality by being representational. Furthermore, the spectator is not in need of signposts and inverted commas to understand that a documentary is a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other.<sup>32</sup>

Instead, what is important is that all documentaries are 'performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable and informed by issues of performance and performativity'.<sup>33</sup> I will go into more detail about the 'performative' later in the introduction, but, for the time being, let us just say that Bruzzi here supposes that documentaries are performative (in J.L. Austin's use of the term where language performs an action, such as "I do" in a marriage ceremony<sup>34</sup>) because their specific 'truths' are only expressed at 'the moment of filming'.<sup>35</sup> Bruzzi's position is again different to Nichols' further elaboration on his 'performative' mode of documentary in *Introduction to Documentary*:

Performance here draws more heavily on the tradition of acting as a way to bring heightened emotional involvement to a situation or role. Performative documentaries bring the emotional intensities of embodied experience and knowledge to the fore rather than attempt to do something tangible. If they set out to do something, it is to help us sense what a certain situation

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<sup>31</sup> Stella Bruzzi, 'Introduction' in, *New Documentary: Second Edition* (Routledge, 2006), p.6

<sup>32</sup> Bruzzi, p.6

<sup>33</sup> Bruzzi, p.1

<sup>34</sup> J.L. Austin (eds. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock), *Philosophical Papers* Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) <sup>35</sup> Bruzzi, p.10

or experience feels like. They want us to feel on a visceral level more than understand on a conceptual level. Performative documentaries intensify the rhetorical desire to be compelling and tie it less to a persuasive goal than an affective one — to have us feel or experience the world in a particular way as vividly as possible.<sup>35</sup>

Bruzzi would surely disagree with the purely affective dimension Nichols here attributes to the performative mode of documentary. Bruzzi's formulation accepts the emotional aspect that performance techniques can entail. However, she argues that they contribute to the complex interaction between filmmaker, text and spectator and that the latter is confronted by the difficulties of representing the world in a documentary because of these performative techniques.<sup>36</sup>

The 'issues of performance' Bruzzi alludes to are three documentary trends that became popular in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century; documentarists who appear onscreen such as Michael Moore and Nick Broomfield, reality television, and the increased use of reconstruction in historical documentaries.<sup>37</sup> The effect created by using these techniques, she argues, is to demonstrate the impossibility of a truthful representation of the world and to distance the spectator from identification with the film text.<sup>38</sup> As a result of her approach, Bruzzi classifies two main types of performative documentary; those that 'feature performative subjects' and heavily stylised aesthetics and others that 'feature the intrusive presence of the filmmaker'.<sup>39</sup> The latter construct performative texts, and indeed their own onscreen performances, as reactions to the perception that documentaries which hide evidence of their own production are better or more convincing at representing reality.<sup>40</sup> Documentary filmmakers such as Broomfield and Moore use their bumbling and frequently hapless personas in order to glean new information on a story, and their films are performative in the sense that they are seemingly being constructed as these pieces of information are disclosed.

This notion of hiding performance is the focus of Thomas Waugh's investigation into how the human subject is represented and represents themselves in documentary film. Waugh identifies two performance schemas; the representational and presentational:

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<sup>35</sup> Bill Nichols, 'How Can We Describe the Modes of Documentary?' in *Introduction to Documentary Second Edition* (Bloomington, IN, USA: Indiana University Press, 2010), p.203

<sup>36</sup> Bruzzi, p.7

<sup>37</sup> Stella Bruzzi, 'The Performative Documentary' in, *New Documentary: Second Edition* (Routledge, 2006), pp.185-6

<sup>38</sup> Bruzzi, p.187

<sup>39</sup> Bruzzi, p.187

<sup>40</sup> Bruzzi, p.187

Let us use “representational” to refer to...“acting naturally,” the documentary code of narrative illusion, borrowed from the dominant fiction cinema. When subjects perform “not looking at the camera,” when they “represent” their lives or roles, the image looks “natural” as if the camera were invisible or as if the subject were unaware of being filmed...The convention of performing an awareness of the camera rather than a nonawareness, of presenting oneself explicitly for the camera— the convention the documentary cinema absorbed from its elder sibling photography— we shall call “presentational” performance.<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, representational performance hides the fact that the subject is performing, while presentational performance reveals a performing subject. Nevertheless, what is either implied or explicitly stated in all of these definitions of the documentary form – documentary as different to fiction, a blurring of the strategies of each, or unapologetically reflexive – is the extent to which the documentary film represents an authentic view of the world in which we live. This is not the aim of my research.

To summarise, my thesis picks up where Bruzzi’s theoretical framework finishes. In her discussions, Bruzzi analyses the performance techniques of and performative effects created by documentaries in the early twentieth century. Her conclusions are that, by adopting such techniques of reconstruction, or the onscreen performer/director, these documentaries engage spectators in reflexive discussions of the objective/subjective rendering of events for the form itself. Furthermore, if the documentary in question is deemed to be a subjective representation, this does not nullify the film’s usefulness. Instead it draws attention to and questions the viability of earlier critical commentaries on the documentary form which establish a binary ‘fact/fiction’ divide. I intend to approach performance in contemporary biographical documentaries (namely, documentaries released after 2005 and focusing on one subject/person) as a specific strategy used by filmmakers to engage the spectator who is situated in a society increasingly concerned with the presentation of identity through performance. Therefore, my research is not concerned with evaluating whether a documentary creates a truthful representation (which is what Bruzzi’s analysis does), but how identities are constructed through performance.

In this way, my research can be seen as a parallel to and extension of the work conducted on the essay film and other examples of ‘first-person documentary’. Laura Rascaroli and Alisa Lebow are two such theorists who develop persuasive criticism on the essay film and its place within contemporary nonfiction debates that have come after Nichols and Bruzzi. In this type of filmmaking, they find the construction of individual subjectivities that are emblematic of how identities are presented and formed using online digital technologies, namely as efforts to

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Waugh, ‘Acting to Play Oneself: Performance in Documentary (1990)’ in *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p.76

stabilise representations of the self within increasingly globalised and fragmented visual cultures.<sup>42</sup> However, rather than films that reflect our current ‘selfie’ and ‘me, me, me’ culture, they see the essay film as dialogic. Their examples have a clear authorial and creative presence, but these filmmakers develop a theme or argument rather than a record of their own lives. Rascaroli’s and Lebow’s theories will be developed further in chapter two and the conclusion.

It is still the case, with this critical discussion about documentaries which feature elements of performance, that such techniques have an effect on the reliability of the argument expressed or authenticity of the world depicted. My research is not aiming to reach a new definition of the documentary form and it will not undertake analysis of how each case-study film creates a truthful representation of reality. That is not to say that the rigorous research and critical discussion into defining documentary by academics I have referenced, as well as many others, is unimportant. As Aufderheide states, ‘naming matters.’<sup>43</sup> Defining concepts creates expectations and identifies tropes and also means that artists, filmmakers and inventors can implement new techniques that can redefine forms and traditions. However, I believe that such have been the shifts in the audio-visual landscape – with regards to new technologies that allow almost all of us to shoot, edit and exhibit our phone-captured videos and the changes to documentary content on television which now seem to prefer ‘gameshow reality’ programmes such as *Big Brother* – that now is the time to accept that the ‘old’ definitions are no longer useful when discussing the original and innovative documentaries that are being made that place the performative centre stage. This is the nature of any medium which relies on technology for its creation, distribution and exhibition. Ultimately, it means that an incisive and vibrant academic debate into the everchanging documentary form can continue, to which my thesis will contribute.

## 1.2 Historical Overview

Erik Barnouw finds that the ‘prenatal stirrings’ of documentary can be traced as far back as 1874 when French astronomer, Pierre Jules Cesar Janssens, sought to record Venus passing across the sun with his camera – *revolver photographique*.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in the experiments of Eadweard Muybridge depicting the various movements of horses and dancers towards the end of the nineteenth century, Barnouw identifies the documentary impulse to record and analyse. Granted,

<sup>42</sup> See Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower, 2009) and Alisa Lebow, *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary* (Wallflower; Columbia University Press: New York, 2012)

<sup>43</sup> Aufderheide, p.4

<sup>44</sup> Erik Barnouw, ‘Glimpse of Wonders: Prophet’ in *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.3

these examples did not involve moving images, but each sought ‘to open our eyes to worlds available to us but, for one reason or another, not perceived.’<sup>45</sup>

By the time the first steps to develop and exhibit film were being made, the dialectic that is evident in Nichols’ definition of the modes of documentary representation and Waugh’s presentational and representational performance styles in documentary is already present. On the one hand, American inventor, Thomas Edison, would encourage subjects to perform in front of his camera – the Kinetoscope – in his specifically constructed laboratory, the Black Maria in New Jersey. A notable example from 1896 sees two employees perform a, rather stilted and awkward, dance to phonograph music in an attempt to demonstrate synchronous sound. On the other side of the Atlantic, the Lumière brothers were developing their Cinématographe. Due to their camera’s manoeuvrability, they could film the world outside which resulted in their short film of workers leaving a factory. Whether one can strictly call these early examples of film ‘documentaries’ (they are more commonly described as ‘actualities’) is perhaps open for debate, but within them lay the foundations of style and technique which later developed into the fiction and nonfiction traditions that would frequently be blurred in documentary production.

Less contentious with regards to definition is Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*, which is often described as the first example of the English-language documentary.<sup>46</sup> A determined explorer, Flaherty observed the Eskimos between 1920 and 1922 in order to make a new type of film that could bring otherwise unrepresented cultures to audiences and celebrate their way of life. Even at this early stage in the history of documentary, blatant performance techniques were utilised. Flaherty observed the Eskimos and how they conducted their day-to-day lives before asking them to recreate scenes in front of the camera which often required multiple takes.<sup>47</sup> The constructed nature of these early documentaries is further evidenced by Flaherty casting non-actors in family roles even when they were not related.<sup>48</sup>

Around the same time that Flaherty was working on *Nanook of the North* in Canada, Dziga Vertov was developing his ‘agit-prop’ aesthetic in Soviet Russia. This technique initially followed Vertov’s motto ‘Life caught unawares’ and therefore shunned overt performance techniques such as recreation.<sup>49</sup> This approach would later be more rigorously adopted by direct cinema practitioners

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<sup>45</sup> Barnouw, p.3

<sup>46</sup> Betsy McLane, ‘Some Ways to Think About Documentary’ in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.4

<sup>47</sup> McLane, ‘The Work of Robert and Frances Flaherty’ in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.32

<sup>48</sup> McLane, p.30

<sup>49</sup> Betsy A. McLane, ‘The Soviets and Political Indoctrination, 1922-1929’ in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.45

in America during the 1960s. However, later on in his career Vertov shifted to including more examples of staged reality and self-reflexivity in his films – especially in the influential work *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) – when developing his theory of the ‘Film Eye’.<sup>50</sup>

Britain’s pioneer at the start of the documentary movement was John Grierson. Working with the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), he developed socially-conscious films designed to be shown across the British Empire in order to improve relations and understanding between nations.<sup>51</sup> The first film made under the EMB was *Drifters* (John Grierson, 1929), which was also the only film for which Grierson received a directing credit. The EMB was disbanded in 1933 due to economic constraints brought about by the Depression. Personnel, including Grierson, then moved to the General Post Office (GPO) where their aim was ‘to increase respect for the work of the GPO, by the population at large and by the GPO workers themselves’ and ‘to stress the fact that post office services provided the means of modern communication.’<sup>52</sup>

Of the many enduring documentaries made in this period, some display performance techniques that would influence a wide range of biographical documentaries in the decades to come. *Housing Problems* (Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey, 1935) is one such example. The direct interviews with those living in slums accompanied by their commentary elsewhere in the film was a new technique and a strategy that, McLane rightly says, would go onto become the dominant form of presentation in television documentary.<sup>53</sup> Possibly the most famous of the films to come out of the GPO was *Night Mail* (Basil Wright and Harry Watt, 1936) which followed the narrative of a postal train from London to Glasgow. It blends the workaday ‘performances’ of employees ruminating on life and work in sets designed to be the train’s carriages, with poetic readings of WH Auden by Stuart Legg and Grierson.<sup>54</sup>

With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, British film personnel put their technical skills to use in the war effort by making indoctrination films under the Crown Film Unit (previously the GPO). Some of these films, by necessity, featured staged events and continued the trend of the films made by the GPO of having ‘non-actors’ engage in scripted or staged enactments. Some examples include *Squadron 992* (Harry Watt, 1940), *Target for Tonight* (Harry Watt, 1941) and *Western Approaches* (Pat Jackson, 1944).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> McLane, p.46

<sup>51</sup> McLane, ‘Institutionalization: Great Britain, 1929-1939’ in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), pp.74-75

<sup>52</sup> McLane, p.78

<sup>53</sup> McLane, p.84

<sup>54</sup> McLane, pp.85-86

<sup>55</sup> McLane, ‘WWII’ in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), pp.120-123 <sup>56</sup> McLane, p.142-144

In America, similar techniques of reconstruction were utilised in documentary records of battle and are notable for being made by Hollywood directors: John Ford's *December 7<sup>th</sup>* (1943); William Wyler's *Memphis Belle* (1944); and Frank Capra's overseeing of the *Why We Fight* series of films from 1942-45 which do not have as much reconstruction as compilation over which emotional voiceover can be heard spoken by Walter Huston.<sup>56</sup> Due in part to many Hollywood directors making documentaries during WWII, post-war documentary and fiction filmmaking enjoyed a cross-fertilisation.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, according to McLane:

[T]he post-war films were freer and more varied in their techniques than were the earlier documentaries. More nonactuality was employed – fictional and dramatic elements – and structurally they tended to be organized as narrative or drama. There was an increased use of actors and performance and more location sound. Sound recording was made easier by the introduction of magnetic tape, developed in WWII by the Germans. It made recording outside the studio much more practicable than it had been with the optical system, but it still demanded large recording equipment and was not truly synched to the visuals. The narrative structures and use of dialogue coincided and complimented the tendency of these post-war documentaries to centre more on individuals than had the films of the thirties.<sup>57</sup>

This shift from the socially conscious documentaries focused on institutions to those centred on the individual subject can be seen as the beginnings of the biographical pursuit in nonfiction film that characterised much subsequent television and film production in the next decades. Beginning in the 1950s, one of the major subjects of television documentaries was what has been termed 'human interest' topics. These are stories about real people, well-known personalities and their day-to-day lives.<sup>58</sup>

At the same time as television documentary was bringing real people's stories into homes (which will be detailed later), in Britain, the Free Cinema movement was similarly focused on individuals, typically from working class backgrounds, in films such as *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (Karel Reisz, 1959). The Free Cinema movement was a reaction against the perceived privileged backgrounds of those filmmakers who came from the Grierson school of documentary filmmaking, but they were also angry about 'the conformity, the ugliness, the lack of individuality present in what was being called a welfare state [...] the upper classes controlling government, business, education and the media'.<sup>59</sup> Key figures in the movement were the filmmakers Lindsay Anderson, Tony

<sup>56</sup> McLane, 'Post-War Documentary, 1945-1961' in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.160

<sup>57</sup> McLane, p.176

<sup>58</sup> McLane, 'Documentary for Television, the "Golden Years", 1951-71' in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.197

<sup>59</sup> McLane, 'British Free Cinema and New American Cinema 1953-60' in *A New History of Documentary Film*:

Richardson and Karel Reisz, and their films of this period are notable for their continued focus on the often disenfranchised individual. Therefore, these films demonstrate a move towards depicting ordinary lives and a biographical impulse which displayed varying degrees of reflexivity regarding the filmmaking process.

Technological advancements in the late 1950s would allow this approach to continue and flourish, eventually leading to two contrasting movements in documentary that would influence the form right up to the present day; direct cinema in America and *cinema verité* which began in France. McLane provides a useful outline of some of the changes to the equipment which was being used by documentary technicians at this time:

With impetus from engineers, technicians and filmmakers, the key equipment that made direct cinema/cinema verité [...] possible began to be made. By substituting plastic for some of the metal moving parts, [...] shoulder-mounted cameras became more lightweight and less noisy, no longer requiring blimps (i.e., casing containing acoustic insulation) [...] Cameras with reflex viewing (actually looking through the lens while shooting), plus zoom lenses, permitted cinematographers to alter the field of view [...] without having to stop to change lenses or to rack focus [...] Increasingly 'fast' film stock (that is, with emulsion very sensitive to light, thus needing little light) permitted shooting without adding illumination to that naturally available [...] For sound,  $\frac{1}{4}$ ' magnetic tape recorders were developed that synchronized with cameras first with a cable and eventually through use of an inaudible sixty-cycle pulse.<sup>60</sup>

These improvements allowed a greater degree of flexibility for documentarians to be able to move their cameras more easily and follow subjects more freely. It also enabled a less intrusive and therefore more surreptitious style of filming, which was something practitioners of direct cinema were keen to exploit for their projects.

Direct cinema, as espoused by its key figures Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, Albert Maysles et al., is observational in style and purpose. To 'catch life unawares' was and is its primary goal. As a result, any awareness of the camera by the film's subject/s is eschewed. So, there are usually no 'talking head' interviews, spoken commentaries or titles. These films tend to follow an individual or subject through, what Stephen Mamber termed, the 'crisis structure'.<sup>61</sup> Films such as *Primary*, which focuses on the campaign tour of John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey in Wisconsin, and *Salesman* (Albert Maysles, David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin,

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*Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.204

<sup>60</sup> McLane, 'Cinema Verité, Direct Cinema 1958-70' in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), pp.222-3

<sup>61</sup> Stephen Mamber, *Cinéma Verité in America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1974)

1968), which follows four door-to-door bible salesmen as they contend with constant rejection, are emblematic of the direct cinema trend.

Although frequently spoken of in the same breath as direct cinema, *cinema verité* (CV) is a markedly different form of documentary filmmaking, especially when it comes to issues of performance. Informed by a specifically European tradition of documentary, CV films are often characterised by having a loose narrative structure with a short essay format predominating. In contrast to direct cinema, these films are highly reflexive due to the filmmakers regularly (although not always) appearing onscreen engaged in dialogue with the film's subjects. As a result, the performances in a CV film are coaxed out of the subject by the filmmaker leading to more intense scrutiny of the filming process. Whether it is the direct cinema film's subject 'playing themselves' in front of the camera or the CV documentarian actively organising the film's trajectory onscreen, both direct cinema and CV films feature performance (as do almost all documentaries to some degree), but the latter's is more noticeable. *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), made by French ethnographer Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin, is an early example of the CV style.<sup>62</sup> The role the filmmaker takes in the film would go on to influence later documentarians such as Nick Broomfield, Werner Herzog and Michael Moore.

The next decade in documentary is usefully described by McLane:

For documentary, the transition from the 1960s into the 1970s was a vibrant era, a time of fruition and fullness. Independent 16mm funding, production, distribution and exhibition were on the upswing. The nontheatrical 16mm market place – schools, libraries, colleges and universities, film societies, even prisons, and later airlines – was substantial [...] The early 70s was also a time to pass the nonfiction baton. A new generation of documentary filmmakers, those who had not lived through the experiences of global depression and WWII, began to come into their own. The 16mm market base, the emergence of degreeed film programmes, the artistic and social upheavals and protests of the 1960s, along with various personal explorations combined to make documentary filmmaking a leading means of creative expression for more people than ever before.<sup>63</sup>

Possibly influenced by direct cinema and CV style and spurred on by the relative ease of filming and increased accessibility, this new breed of filmmakers from many walks of life began documenting their own experiences. Depictions of the self and the individual continued with documentaries being made by marginalised groups including those from a feminist and gay and

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<sup>62</sup> McLane, 'Cinema Verité, Direct Cinema 1958-70' in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.227

<sup>63</sup> McLane, 'The 1970s: Power to the People' in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.244

lesbian perspective – *Word is Out* (Mariposa Film Groups, 1977) and *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography* (Bonnie Sherr Klein, 1982) being two examples.

The move to video in the 1980s made this kind of filmmaking even more accessible, not just for proficient filmmakers. Video tape was much cheaper than film and did not have to be processed. Furthermore, because of the reduced cost of tape, the shooting ratios (the amount of footage filmed against the length of the finished film) for documentaries increased. As McLane comments, '[s]ince it cost virtually nothing to let the camera run, why turn it off?'<sup>64</sup> Understandably, this revolution in filmmaking process greatly benefited practitioners of direct cinema who could theoretically record their subjects endlessly.

At this time, a democratisation in filmmaking began to occur. The reduced cost, ease of use and lightweight qualities of video brought documentary filmmaking into the domestic sphere. These 'home movies', which sought to reach larger audiences than friends and family, became known as 'personal essay' films. As Pat Aufderheide describes:

First-person films – diaries, memoirs, home movies, therapeutic records, travelogues – have been part of the audio-visual landscape for decades. But it was not until the mid-1980s that the personal essay film became accessible beyond the reaches of film schools and art houses, and began to take a place in the programming diet of television...Personal essay documentaries were part of a trend in documentary work overall towards a more intimate approach, even in explicitly public affairs subject matter, with the goal of intervening in a shared understanding of meaning. In this documentary genre, the narrator takes clear ownership of the narration, at the same time that the narrator is a character. They are frankly, inevitably personal.<sup>65</sup>

Filmmakers such as Ross McElwee – and later Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock – engage in precisely this kind of role-playing performance that display playful representations of the directors' lives. This is where these films become forms of autobiography and it is a tradition that continued into the 1990s.

As the centuries changed, so did the popularity of the documentary form. Of course, the production and exhibition of all types of film and media has increased, but the twenty-first century has been characterised by a renewed critical and commercial interest in the nonfiction form with many feature documentaries enjoying prolonged and successful runs in cinemas.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> McLane, 'Video Arrives' in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.273

<sup>65</sup> Pat Aufderheide cited in McLane, 'Video Arrives', in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.277-8

<sup>66</sup> McLane, 'Documentary in the Twenty-First Century', in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.357

Some critics attribute the success to film festivals which help to showcase and, eventually, sell films to distributors.<sup>67</sup> Influential festivals include Sundance, the Sheffield Documentary Festival and Toronto, but there are many others.

Furthermore, with cameras attached to almost every smartphone, we have arguably all become documentarians able to instantly exhibit our work on video sharing sites like YouTube. Clearly quality is variable, and each video's worth may not be comparable with feature documentaries. Indeed, the increasingly ubiquitous 'selfie' and the sharing of snapshots on sites like Instagram can be seen as digital equivalents of the family photo album. Nevertheless, in this current phenomenon, the auto/biographical impulse may never have been clearer or easier as the example of *Life in a Day* (Kevin MacDonald, 2011) emphasised when it crowdsourced video uploads from people around the globe to create a worldwide patchwork of stories from individuals willing to perform and participate in the endeavour.

This film, and others, demonstrates the '[i]mmediacy, worldwide reach, diverse opinions, on-the-ground reporting and extreme economy' that digital has brought to the documentary form.<sup>68</sup> In *The Square* (Jehane Noujaim, 2013) these effects are evident in the 'frontline' recordings by those at the centre of the protests in Tahrir Square, Egypt, as the Arab Spring gained in momentum, but also in the countless stunts, outtakes and performances uploaded to sites such as YouTube where 'views' are cultural currency and each filmmaker seeks popularity and the rarefied title of having 'gone viral'. The internet, not the cinema, is the venue through which these films and videos reach an audience. With a potential viewership of billions and, in most cases, able to be seen for free, online digital sites are an increasingly dominant distribution channel for nonfiction output which, nevertheless, feature performative trends.

For Stella Bruzzi, post-millennial documentary is noteworthy for its consistent inclusion of and interest in performative elements. As already noted, Bruzzi theorises that all forms of documentary are inherently performative, but she lists some of the performance features of many twenty-first century documentaries:

The divergence between on-screen and off-screen personae, the use of reconstruction as a tool for representing and reinvigorating the past, a sustained interest in subjects whose lives seem built around layers of performance are all performative elements that feature strongly amongst these post-millennium documentaries.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> McLane, p.357

<sup>68</sup> McLane, 'Now and When' in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.384

<sup>69</sup> Stella Bruzzi, 'Contemporary Documentaries: Performance and Success' in *New Documentary: Second*

My thesis engages with various examples of performative techniques centred on biographical projects. As we have seen, the use of fictional strategies is not a new phenomenon in nonfiction texts. Rather it is how they are used in contemporary documentary cinema concerning biographical subjects that is of interest to this study. It should be noted, however, that while the following chapters examine documentary films, factual output on television has had a profound impact on how audiences respond to these cinematic texts, especially related to performing identities.

These ‘factual entertainment’<sup>70</sup> programmes first appeared, in Britain at least, through the 1970s and 1980s, reaching their zenith during the 1990s. It was at this time that they began to be called ‘docusoaps’. This type of programme displays, according to Richard Kilborn, ‘hybrid qualities’ in the way ‘they combine features associated with “classic” observational documentary with structuring techniques that are regularly deployed in soap-opera narratives’.<sup>71</sup> Thus, programmes associated with this form of television documentary usually centred on a selection of ‘characters’ conducting their day-to-day work whilst interacting with the camera. The programmes tended to be thirty minutes long and end with a cliff-hanger to entice viewers to tune in the following week. Examples from the UK include *Vets in Practice*, *Driving School* and *Airport*. For Bruzzi, docusoaps were defined by a paradox:

[...]they purported to be interested in the excessively ordinary, whilst at the same time having reached the level of success and notoriety they did by the discovery and promotion of ‘stars’ – individuals who, more than those around them, transcended and achieved an identity beyond the series that created them. The casting of documentaries has always been commonplace, but docusoaps took this a stage further. Maureen in *Driving School* proved crucial to the series’ popularity [...] and after it ended she starred in a follow-up *Driving School* special, acquired an agent, made copious independent television appearances and released a single[...]<sup>72</sup>

Docusoaps proved that what television audiences wanted more than anything else was entertaining ‘performances’ of people ‘playing themselves’. At first, perhaps due to the heterogeneity of the television form – where a documentary could be shown between a soap and a drama series – spectators paid little attention to the amount of staging and/or reconstruction in docusoaps. However, by the late 90s, stories began to break in the popular press which revealed that some programmes that reported to be authentic documentaries were in fact elaborate fakes

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*Edition* (London: Routledge, 2013), p.222

<sup>70</sup> Bruzzi, ‘New Observational Documentary: From “Docusoaps” to Reality Television’ in *New Documentary: Second Edition* (Routledge, 2006), p.121

<sup>71</sup> Richard Kilborn, ‘The Docu-Soap: A Critical Assessment’ in John Izod and Richard Kilborn, eds., *From Grierson to the Docu-Soap: Breaking the Boundaries* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 2000), p.112

<sup>72</sup> Bruzzi, p.135

(see John Ellis' account<sup>73</sup>). Consequently, the BBC held an editorial policy meeting which sought to establish new guidelines regarding staging and reconstruction in TV documentaries. The resulting document concluded with bullet points which listed 'acceptable and unacceptable practice in factual programmes'<sup>75</sup>:

- Programmes should truthfully and fairly depict what has happened.
- Programmes should never do anything to mislead audiences.
- While it may, on occasions, be legitimate to re-shoot something that is a routine or insignificant action, it is not legitimate to state or re-stage action which is *significant to the development of the action or narrative, without clearly signalling this to the audience*.
- Contributors should *not* be asked to re-enact *significant* events, without this being made clear in the film. ...
- If significant events have been arranged for the cameras that would not have taken place *at all* without the intervention of the programme-makers, then this must be made clear to the audience.
- Shots and sequences should never be intercut to suggest that they were happening at the same time if the resulting juxtaposition of material leads to a distorted and misleading impression of events.<sup>74</sup>

As these guidelines demonstrate, discussions about the representation of subjects so as not to mislead an audience as well as questions of authenticity which, as seen previously, have dominated criticism of documentary feature production, also affected the ways TV documentaries were made. Surely it is no coincidence that following 'the crisis of 1999', as Ellis describes the controversy of faked documentary programmes, the next year brought a new millennium and a new way of representing 'real life' on television.

Perhaps the most famous example of the reality TV format is *Big Brother*, which originated in the Netherlands and was first shown in the UK in 2000. Still made today, the series can be seen as a reaction to the increased scrutiny by viewers and producers of documentary programmes into the veracity of the documentary image on television. Therefore, the documentary subjects are moved into a single location and filmed by numerous cameras 24/7. Personalities are again important, so the series holds 'casting calls' and a series of background and psychological tests before the applicants are reduced to the 'chosen few'.<sup>75</sup> As Bruzzi acknowledges, series such as *Big Brother* depend on the creation of friction so 'housemates' are often selected based on opposing religions,

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<sup>73</sup> John Ellis, 'Documentary and Truth on Television: The Crisis of 1999' in Alan Rosenthal and John Corner, eds. *Challenges in Documentary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp.345-349 <sup>75</sup> Bruzzi, p.131

<sup>74</sup> Unpublished minutes from BBC 1998 editorial meeting cited in Bruzzi, p.131

<sup>75</sup> Bruzzi, p.141

classes, sexualities and political allegiances.<sup>76</sup> Still shown eighteen years later, the UK series has noticeably shifted from a more serious social experiment in its early years on Channel 4, to the entertainment ‘docusoap’ format once it moved to Channel 5. What is also significant in reality series and other ‘formatted documentaries’ such as *I’m a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!, The Great British Bake Off* and *The Apprentice*, is how these programmes construct a ‘performance space’<sup>77</sup> for their subjects after which the viewing public or panel of experts judge them on how well they performed.

Concomitant with the rise in digital technologies is the boom in satellite television subscription outlets which dedicate entire channels to documentary output, not to mention the increase in factual programming terrestrial channels in Britain – such as BBC, ITV and Channel 4 – have produced. Arguably, television is the medium where the greatest amount of performance in documentary takes place which, I propose, creates expectations for the viewer of biographical feature documentaries.

Annette Hill stresses the importance of the investigation of authenticity for television, writing that the ‘debate about what is real and what is not is the million dollar question for popular factual television’.<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, Hill goes on to state that television audiences are sceptical of the veracity of the images they see ‘precisely because they expect people to “act up” in order to make entertaining factual television.’<sup>79</sup> The effects are visible if we consider the shift from the journalistic enquiry of series like *7 Up* on ITV, beginning in 1964, which revisited subjects every seven years to track changes in their lives, to the current gameshow reality products like *Big Brother* and *I’m a Celebrity, Get Me out of Here!* that are structured around the observation of people ‘acting up’ of which Hill speaks.

The last few years have also witnessed the increased popularity of so-called ‘scripted reality’ programmes, such as *The Only Way is Essex* and *Made in Chelsea*, which make no attempt to hide the overt staging of confrontations and constructed action. There is also the curious success of *Gogglebox* on Channel 4 which films people in their homes reacting to the week’s most notable television. What each of these examples indicates is the investigative position of the spectator, in Hill’s formulation, who analyses these texts for examples of direct performance. In contrast to the majority of criticism in documentary studies, many commentators of performance in factual

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<sup>76</sup> Bruzzi, p.140

<sup>77</sup> John Corner, ‘Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions’, *Television and New Media*, 3:3, August 2002: 255-269; 257

<sup>78</sup> Annette Hill, ‘Performance and Authenticity’ in *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (London : Routledge, 2005), p.57

<sup>79</sup> Hill, p.57

programming on television are much more accepting of the practice. Perhaps this is due to the differing artistic merits of each medium in critical circles, or that documentaries on television could be placed between fictional programmes in the schedule. Either way, the analytical spectator that Hill postulates, I argue, can take up a similar position when viewing feature documentaries and compare performance features in these films with those in everyday society in the aid of constructing individual identity.

### 1.3 Performance and Performative

[A]ll Art [is] to some degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realise one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life.

Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.

(Oscar Wilde in *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* and *The Critic as Artist*, respectively)<sup>80</sup>

The central thrust to Oscar Wilde's performance theory involves the close connection – and indeed essential relationship – between performance and the self, stating that the implementation of the former leads the latter to be more authentic.<sup>81</sup> Dependent upon this exercise is the perception of the person's performance by other individuals, 'individuality as constructed out of exhibition'.<sup>82</sup> Of course, being a gay man who was married in Victorian London, Wilde had direct experience of the importance the performance of the self could have in one's day-to-day life. Indeed, the centrality of the performance of identity to understanding a person's role in society is a key aspect of some later theories on performance to be discussed here.

By first examining some influential theories from the fields of psychoanalysis and philosophy on how we form our identities, we will be able to see how these relate to performance. Jacques Lacan, for instance, expounds upon the formation of subjectivity in his oft-cited 'mirror-stage' of a

<sup>80</sup> Wilde cited in Heather Marcovitch, *Art of the Pose: Oscar Wilde's Performance Theory* (Berne, IN, USA: Peter Lang AG, 2010), p.9 and p.93

<sup>81</sup> Marcovitch, 'Introduction: Oscar Wilde and Performance Theory' in *Art of the Pose: Oscar Wilde's Performance Theory* (Berne, IN, USA: Peter Lang AG, 2010), p.11

<sup>82</sup> Marcovitch, 'Wilde's Performance Theory and the Critical Essays' in *Art of the Pose: Oscar Wilde's Performance Theory* (Berne, IN, USA: Peter Lang AG, 2010), p.95

child's development. Here, Lacan notes how the child of around six to eighteen months is able to recognise him/herself in a mirror or other reflection, which sets them apart from other species:

This act [...] once the image has been mastered and found empty, immediately rebounds in the case of the child in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates – the child's own body, and the persons and things, around him.<sup>83</sup>

As such, a fundamental part of this act of recognition is a performance, or 'play' involving gestures, in order to differentiate the child's self from the world around them. However, as Lacan acknowledges, this process 'splits' the child's subjectivity to a certain extent. In this moment, there exists the child's image in reality and a 'fictional' reflection in the mirror, with both images having an asymptotic relationship, neither being fully consolidated with(in) the other.<sup>84</sup> Consequently, Lacan states that the 'mirror-stage' establishes 'a relation between the organism and its reality'.<sup>85</sup> Understandably, later film theorists, such as Christian Metz, adopted Lacan's formulation in their writing on the cinema screen-as-mirror.<sup>86</sup> And this positioning of the subject in 'reality' has a direct relevance with documentary film, whose stories largely depict 'real' people in the 'real' world.

Building upon Lacan's earlier work, Louis Althusser, in his writing on the formation of ideology and the state, proposes the term 'interpellation' as a process which is crucial to the development of the subject within these ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) and repressive state apparatuses (RSAs). The example Althusser gives is of a person walking down the street who is hailed from behind by a police officer who shouts, "You there!" at which point the person turns around in response to the statement. In so doing, the person becomes a subject.<sup>87</sup> Writing from a Marxist perspective, Althusser seeks to demonstrate how individuals become subjects in service to the ideologies of controlling state groups and that we participate in daily rituals and gestures – forms of social performance – that mark ourselves out as subjects. The rest of this section on 'Performance and Performative' will clarify how these terms will be used throughout the rest of

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<sup>83</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', trans. Alan Sheridan in *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), p.1

<sup>84</sup> Lacan, p.2

<sup>85</sup> Lacan, p.4

<sup>86</sup> See Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (London: Palgrave: Macmillan Press, 1982)

<sup>87</sup> Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and the State', trans. Ben Brewster in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: NLB, 1977)

this project. I will begin with the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, whose writing on subjectivity and social performance seems to have influenced Althusser but is different in numerous ways.

Goffman's work has been influential. In his 1959 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman establishes a discursive link between the theatrical stage and the techniques employed by the stage actor, and the way an individual presents themselves to others during various kinds of social interaction. In this respect both the individual and the others with whom the individual interacts are aware that a certain amount of performance takes place. On the part of the individual, he or she both *gives impressions* and *gives off impressions*. Goffman argues:

The first involves verbal symbols or their substitutes which he uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the others are known to attach to these symbols. This is communication in the traditional and narrow sense. The second involves a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way. As we shall have to see, this distinction has only initial validity. The individual does of course intentionally convey misinformation by means of both of these types of communication, the first involving deceit, the second feigning.<sup>88</sup>

A simplistic example might be that if a person says to another person, "I'm sorry". The expression the person *gives* is that they are offering an apology and their intonation might imply that it is sincere. However, the person is stood with their arms folded in front of them. Therefore, the expression that the individual *gives off* indicates that they are not being forthright, and that the apology may be forced. How these expressions are interpreted will depend on the specific individual. As Goffman notes, presumably the individual will be unaware of the expression he or she is 'giving off' as they are busy constructing and regulating the expression 'given'. Consequently, the others that are present have access to two streams of expressions and are free to decide how much faith they put in either, thus creating an asymmetrical relationship between the viewers and viewed.<sup>89</sup>

Related to the communication of these two kinds of expression is Goffman's formulation of 'front'. This is 'the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance'<sup>90</sup> and can be sub-categorised into 'setting' and 'personal front':

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<sup>88</sup> Erving Goffman, 'Preface' in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Penguin: London, 1959), p.14

<sup>89</sup> Goffman, p.18

<sup>90</sup> Goffman, 'Performances' in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Penguin: London, 1959), p.32

[...] the 'setting', involving furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it. A setting tends to stay put, geographically speaking, so that those who would use a particular setting as part of their performance cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it.<sup>91</sup>

Whereas the setting is the platform or location on/in which the individual performs, 'personal front' is, by definition, more closely connected to the performer. For Goffman, this is the expressive equipment that comes to define the character of the individual and may include: 'insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex; age; and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like'.<sup>92</sup> Here, Goffman demonstrates a discursive link between everyday social interaction and the terminology and structure of the theatre where setting corresponds to *mise-en-scène* and personal front becomes costume and character development.

In his later work, *Stigma*, Goffman introduces two differing forms of identity. The first is 'personal identity', which is the public, created persona and is 'the result of the techniques that people use to manage the information they convey about themselves to others'.<sup>93</sup> On the other hand, there is 'social identity' which consists of the personal attributes that others assign to us based on their initial assessment of our appearance and personal and structural attributes.<sup>94</sup> It is important to note that, as we saw in Wilde's writing, our identity is not solely our own. It is shaped and defined by others around us, an audience we might say. This makes performance in documentary film a curious example where discourses of identity and performance are assumed to be authentic because of the documentary form's historical – and arguable – recourse to depict the world and its subjects accurately.

American theatre director and academic Richard Schechner holds a similar view to Goffman in that he believes that performance is an essential aspect in social life. He makes a distinction between 'social drama' and 'aesthetic drama', where the former is defined as the performances and conflicts of everyday life and the latter denotes theatrical performances. For Schechner, each has an impact on the other:

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<sup>91</sup> Goffman, pp.32–33

<sup>92</sup> Goffman, p.34

<sup>93</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963) cited in Audrey Levasseur, 'Film and Video Self-Biographies' in *Biography*, Vol.23, Issue 1, 2000, p.178

<sup>94</sup> Goffman cited in Levasseur, p.178

Social dramas affect aesthetic dramas, aesthetic dramas affect social dramas. The visible actions of a given social drama are informed – shaped, conditioned, guided – by underlying aesthetic principles and specific theatrical or rhetorical techniques. Reciprocally, a culture's visible aesthetic theatre is informed – shaped, conditioned, guided – by underlying processes of social interaction. The politician, activist, militant, terrorist all use techniques of the theatre (staging) to support social action – events that are consequential, that is, designed to change the social order or to maintain it. The theatre artist uses the consequential actions of social life as the underlying themes, frames, and/or rhythms of her/his art. The theatre is designed to entertain and sometimes to effect changes in perception, viewpoint, attitude: in other words, to make spectators react to the world of social drama in new ways. There is a flowing back and forth, up and down, characterising the relationship between social and aesthetic dramas [...]<sup>95</sup>

Writing from a background in theatre studies, Schechner places more emphasis on the mutual dependency and borrowing from each form of drama compared to Goffman who simply applies dramaturgical processes to examples from social life. Nevertheless, if we can apply these theories to film, and auto/biographical documentaries specifically, we will be able to see the complex interrelation of performance in everyday life and the constructive frame of the documentary camera. Due to documentary's perceived aim to record an aspect of or an argument from the world (although, as I have already discussed, this is by no means its only function), it would seem to be the cinematic equivalent to Schechner's 'social drama' classification. Likewise, 'aesthetic drama' could readily describe preconceived definitions of fiction filmmaking (however, again, to view documentary as not aesthetic is to miss the whole picture). Therefore, we might reasonably assume the same dialectic as Schechner which demonstrates the cross-fertilisation of performance trends in each.

James Naremore, writing on acting techniques in cinema and following Goffman's theory that all of us perform nearly all the time in society, posits that people in film can be categorised into three broad types: 'as actors playing theatrical personages, as public figures playing theatrical versions of themselves, and as documentary evidence'.<sup>96</sup> He elaborates:

If the term performance is defined in its broadest sense, it covers the last category as much as the first: when people are caught unawares by a camera, they become objects to be looked at, and they usually provide evidence of role-playing in everyday life; when they know they are being photographed, they become role-players of another sort.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Richard Schechner 'Selective Inattention' in, *Performance Theory* (Routledge: New York, 1988), p.190

<sup>96</sup> James Naremore, 'Performance in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley, CA, USA: University of California Press, 1988), p.15

<sup>97</sup> Naremore, p.15

Almost all of the documentary subjects I will be examining – autobiographers, musical performers, sporting personalities, drag acts etc. – are ‘role-players of another sort’ and it is my aim to investigate how they create their identities when the camera is focussed on them.

Related to the term ‘performance’ is the ‘performative’, and it is worth highlighting how the two are different. Among the first popular uses of the term came from English philosopher J.L. Austin as detailed in his *Philosophical Papers*.<sup>98</sup> Writing on linguistics, Austin explains the ‘performative utterance’ as a phrase which both describes an action and performs that action. This is the opposite of what he terms the ‘constative’ which merely describes an action. The distinction here is that rather than lending itself to being evaluated as either a true or false utterance – if it is ‘performed’ in that way - the ‘performative’ makes active that which it describes. Examples include the bride and groom saying, “I do” at a wedding, or ‘I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth’ as a bottle of champagne is smashed against its side because ‘in saying what I do, I actually perform that action’.<sup>99</sup> As previously mentioned, Bruzzi applies the performative utterance to documentary:

A parallel is to be found between these linguistic examples and the performative documentary which – whether built around the intrusive presence of the filmmaker or self-conscious performances by its subjects – is the enactment of the notion that a documentary only comes into being as it is performed, that although its factual basis (or document) can pre-date any recording or representation of it, the film itself is necessarily performative because it is given meaning by the interaction between performance and reality.<sup>100</sup>

Performance techniques or stylistic devices that have historically been associated with the fiction film, then, are instrumental to the performative documentary’s structure and aesthetic. These could include reconstruction, artificial lighting, non-diegetic score, make-up, costume, animation or any other number of stylistic choices. A brief discussion of an exemplary ‘performative’ documentary can help clarify some of these critical debates.

Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* (2012) is an intriguing example of a documentary that self-consciously integrates performance into its structure to create a deeply unsettling commentary on how the re-enactment of violence can reveal a person’s identity. The story of Indonesian death squads who massacred thousands of communists fifty years ago, *The Act of Killing* was initially intended to focus on the families of the victims. However, when numerous interviewees were arrested for speaking out, Oppenheimer shifted attention to the perpetrators

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<sup>98</sup> J.L. Austin (eds. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock), *Philosophical Papers* Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970)

<sup>99</sup> Austin, p.235

<sup>100</sup> Bruzzi, p.186

who are, startlingly, free men and have never been made to answer for their crimes. Seemingly unaffected by guilt and boastful of their actions, Oppenheimer decided to give members of the death squads the opportunity to recreate scenes of their killings in any way they wanted. This was planned to demonstrate 'how we use storytelling to create our world, justify our actions and escape from bitter truths'.<sup>101</sup>

The film's relationship to performance is highlighted by its provocative title. On the one hand, it refers to the physical act of taking a human life (as is explicitly described by members of the death squads in the film) and on the other the performance the killers 'put on' in their re-enactments, which reference a variety of archetypal film genres. Therefore, two levels of 'front' (in Goffman's terms), both 'setting' and 'personal', are explored during the film. The first involves the re-enactment scenes, which, in their use of literal sets, costume and makeup, collapse the distinction Goffman makes between social performance and dramaturgical performance. In one sequence, squad members recreate an interrogation and murder in the style of 1940s film noir. The features of the 'setting' front include the derelict office set, with chiaroscuro lighting and cigarette smoke. The 'personal' front includes fedora hats, sharp suits, a knife, and garrotte. These two elements combine to form a recognisable set of noir iconography, with which the film spectator will be familiar. In a traditional generic fiction film, these two elements would be classified as mise-én-scene and costume, but here the performance – which is treated reflexively as we see the 'players' prepare for the scene – serves the purpose of the documentary. History is recreated, reality is being performed.

Oppenheimer's aim for implementing this distinctive documentary approach was to encourage the death squad leaders to open up about their part in Indonesia's bloody past (although it does not seem as if they needed much persuasion). It also offers them an opportunity to realise the consequences of their actions, as well as situating difficult, disturbing issues in familiar cinematic conventions for an audience. However, the squad members use a second level of 'front' when they are not engaged in these re-enactments. Oppenheimer also films these men going about their everyday lives, whether that be socialising, spending time with family, or being treated as local celebrities by the public. The 'setting' front in this instance include crowded streets where the death squad leaders attempt to recruit 'actors' from the neighbourhood to play communists in their recreated scenes, a bustling market where a paramilitary leader goes around extorting Chinese stall owners, or a rooftop where many of the mass killings took place. During the latter, Anwar Congo, who is well-known to the locals as a leader of the death squads and who becomes the focus for the documentary, re-enacts his preferred killing technique, whereby the victim is

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<sup>101</sup> Joshua Oppenheimer quoted in introduction to the film when broadcast on Sky Atlantic in 2015.

tied to a post and strangled with a length of metal wire. ‘Personal front’ might include Anwar’s garish Hawaiian shirts, the orange and black fatigues of the Pancasila Youth organisation (who were involved in many of the mass killings), or Herman (another squad leader) with his rotund stomach and distinctive ponytail hairstyle. By interspersing these ‘everyday’ scenes between the re-enactments, Oppenheimer reveals the slippage between social performance and more overt forms of acting, the common features of each, which makes the recounting of such barbaric acts of violence even more harrowing.

*The Act of Killing* is an unsettling experience for the film spectator. However, it also has profound effects for one of the documentary’s main ‘characters.’ As Oppenheimer films the death squad leaders’ recreations, Anwar Congo begins to question his part in the events. He feels guilty and remorseful and this change can be seen as a direct result of his awareness of the different performances, social and theatrical, in which he is participating in the documentary. At the start, Anwar is pictured talking to Oppenheimer about the importance the film they are making could have for showing the world who they (those involved in the killing of communists in Indonesia) are and their history. As such, he appears to throw himself into the creation of scenes with a deeply troubling exuberance. Part of this comes through his obsession with how he looks on camera, his ‘personal front’.

After acting out the rooftop killing scene, Anwar and his friends gather to watch the results. However, instead of its graphic content of mimed murder, Anwar is more concerned that he is wearing white trousers when he always wore dark colours for killings, his acting is not violent enough and he should perhaps dye his hair black like it was when he was younger. Here, Anwar’s behaviour seems similar to those method actors who would fully immerse themselves in roles to perform an accurate version of life. It is telling then, that at the time of carrying out the murders, Anwar worked at a cinema and explains how he was influenced by one of the ‘Method’ school’s most prolific exponents, Marlon Brando, as well as the films of Al Pacino and John Wayne westerns.

The first re-enactment scene is in the style of gangster film noir. As previously mentioned, the sequence is replete with the genre’s stylistic conventions and props. However, midway through the action when Anwar is strangling his victim, the call to evening prayers is heard, and the scene is stopped. Waiting around until the prayers are finished (in which the ‘players’ do not participate), Anwar begins a monologue on what constitutes human rights. His drawn-out speech and affectation of striking a match on the table to light his cigarette make it seem as if he has become fully engrossed in his performance. ‘I’m a movie theatre gangster’, he declares at the end. This self-conscious declaration of the role he is performing is significant in that it comes at a time

when the 'real' social world – evening prayers – has intruded upon the group's carefully constructed fictional performance; Anwar's improvisation can be interpreted as an attempt to maintain the pretence and, perhaps, a childish justification for the role he played in bloody past events.

The next scene the group re-enact is more naturalistic and, perhaps because of this everyday setting, more harrowing. Before the performance starts, Anwar's neighbour tells how his Stepfather was killed by the death squads so as it might be included in the film. He assures them that he is not criticising what they were doing at the time but appears nervous as he faces those who were involved in the murders of countless other families' fathers, mothers and children. After the neighbour finishes his story, Anwar says that it is too complicated to include and Oppenheimer cuts to the neighbour's mock interrogation in the scene. He sobs, dribbling, pleading for his life. The visceral effect seems too sincere to be a performance and the camera match cuts to Anwar sitting watching the scene looking increasingly uncomfortable. A technique used in fiction filmmaking to create symbolic meaning between shots, match cutting here encourages the spectator to infer that the emotional violence of the scene is affecting Anwar and is making him re-evaluate his past actions.

Anwar undergoes a change and increasingly starts to feel guilt and remorse for what he has done until, in the conclusion to the film, Anwar once again visits the rooftop killing site. In a powerful sequence where, up until now, the distinctions between Goffman's social and theatrical 'setting' and 'personal' fronts have existed separately (in the way Oppenheimer edits between scenes), Anwar's 'movie tough guy' persona, that he has seemingly maintained in order to shield him from the horrific reality of the murders he has committed, comes crashing down. He again describes the killings that have taken place here, but this time he breaks down and begins retching as he protests, 'I know it was wrong, but I had to do it.' It is a moment of realisation – a catharsis that shakes the spectator into a different way of viewing the film and its characters – and, as Anwar silently leaves the rooftop and the shop below, disappearing out of shot, it is assumed that he steps back out into the 'real' world with a changed sense of how he should now perform in society.

However, because *The Act of Killing* has shown the killers performing their scenes and Anwar revelling in his costumes and use of make-up, the spectator is left on shaky representational ground. Is Anwar's transformation another element to his performance? Can we trust what we see? Goffman comments that the social actor can become so engrossed in his or her role that they believe in the reality they are performing.<sup>102</sup> Whether we as viewers believe in what we see

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<sup>102</sup> Goffman, p.28

is not the issue. What *The Act of Killing* demonstrates is how the contemporary documentary film, through its use of cinematic reconstructions, can utilise the dynamics of performance to encourage both its subjects and spectators to engage with and interpret the world around them. Indeed, the traumatic history of the country was important enough for Oppenheimer to return for his next project, *The Look of Silence* (2014), which this time examines one family's experiences of the massacres.

Central to all of this however, and to the majority of my research, is the performing subject who, as Judith Butler notes, is not immune to the performative process. Following on from Austin, Butler uses the performative to describe what she believes to be our unstable and fluid gender boundaries:

According to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation, however, it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the “integrity” of the subject. In other words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.<sup>103</sup>

Applied to the performance of identities by biographical subjects in documentary, we can extend Butler's analysis to suggest that individuals in social life are usually in the process of displaying signs, gestures – fabrications, as Butler calls them – that will adhere to what is understood to be the ‘norm’. Here then, it can be seen that we return to Goffman and expressions ‘given’ and ‘given off’.

Butler's hypothesis is perhaps more attributable to that of anthropologist, Victor Turner, who, when analysing indigenous cultures, was able to identify two types of performance. ‘Structure’

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<sup>103</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions’ in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999) p.173

serves to reinforce the culture's social hierarchy. 'Communitas' is the performance of individuals who have been marginalised by this hierarchy.<sup>104</sup> As a result a tension is created between these two performances with those involved in the 'communitas' seeking to free their identities from the norm.<sup>105</sup> A similar impulse exists in the representation of LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) in documentary and film more generally and is where Butler's theorisation stems. Queer-themed documentaries and the structure of identity will be explored more fully in chapter four.

What my explanation of some of the theories of performance and the performative has demonstrated is the essential role performance plays in contemporary society. Documentary film has its own crucial part to play in the representation of our cultures. But rather than evaluating how authentic this representation is in contemporary biographical documentaries, I believe it is more productive to analyse exactly how these films negotiate meaning through performativity and how they engage a spectator with elements of performance and the performative to reflect on their own identities.

## 1.4 Biography and Autobiography

If definition is the essential foundation upon which any meaningful debate and investigation can take place, let me provide a brief summary of the terms 'biography' and 'autobiography', which form the centre of my research in the documentary film format. The validity or flexibility of their definitions will be tackled throughout the project related to how they inform the performance of identity by documentary subjects.

Nigel Hamilton provides a useful introductory history to biography. Broadly, he defines biography as 'our creative and nonfictional output devoted to recording and interpreting real lives'.<sup>106</sup> To this, as has plagued documentary criticism, he adds that the recent increased popularity of biography has intensified debate about the form's notions of 'truth and imagination'.<sup>107</sup> For Hamilton, the ongoing tension for biography is the 'tug of war' between, on the one hand, idealisation – the tendency, especially in ancient times, for biographers to offer up laudatory

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<sup>104</sup> Victor Turner cited in Markovitch, pp.18-19

<sup>105</sup> Victor Turner cited in Markovitch, pp.18-19

<sup>106</sup> Nigel Hamilton, 'Prologue' in *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.1

<sup>107</sup> Hamilton, p.1

descriptions of key figures – and critical interpretation on the other – a questioning drive to better understand the ‘unofficial’ story of a life<sup>108</sup>:

Where does fact end and interpretation begin? Is biography essentially the chronicle of an individual’s life journey (and thus a branch of history, employing similar processes of research and scholarship), or is it an art of human portraiture that must, for social and psychologically constructive reasons, capture the essence and distinctiveness of a real individual to be useful both in its time and for posterity?<sup>109</sup>

Again, the echoes of documentary criticism are clear, but also evident is one of the functions of biography to record – either via writing, portraiture, speech, film et al. – so as to better contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the past.<sup>110</sup> Hamilton believes this to have been the impulse of nearly every early society and civilisation, dating back to the cave paintings of prehistoric man some thirty thousand years ago (itself a subject of the documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* [Werner Herzog, 2010]), right up to the present day and the web blog.<sup>111</sup>

And the reason for this continued use of biographical recording? For Hamilton it is the second function of biography; the insight it provides into ‘human character, experience of life, and human emotion, as guides to our own complex self-understanding, as individuals.’<sup>112</sup> The desire to know ‘who you are’ and one’s place in the world is a fundamental feature of humanity and is therefore one of the reasons that we, in contemporary society, continue to watch historical television programmes on famous figures and the latest reality show of people performing for us. The biographical impulse is central to understanding our own identities.

According to Hamilton, autobiography is as old and as concerned with the depiction of a life as biography but is instead recorded by and about the life of the biographer.<sup>113</sup> Autobiography still displays the tension between idealisation and critical interpretation. This dialectic is perhaps even more evident in autobiography precisely because it centres on the biographer’s own construction of their identity. Michael Renov refers to the definition of autobiography found in literary studies:

[...] autobiography is a form of personal writing that is referential (that is, imbued with history), mainly retrospective (though the temporality of the telling may be quite complex), and in which the author, the narrator, and the protagonist are identical. Autobiographical practice in the West is as old as the confessional writings of Augustine (the late fifth century [sic]), yet as memoir, diary,

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<sup>108</sup> Hamilton, ‘Evolutionary Biography’, p.32

<sup>109</sup> Hamilton, p.15

<sup>110</sup> Hamilton, p.8

<sup>111</sup> Hamilton, p.8

<sup>112</sup> Hamilton, p.10

<sup>113</sup> Hamilton, p.27

personal essay, or testimonial, it currently enjoys a popularity and critical prominence never before achieved.<sup>114</sup>

Renov is here writing in the context of autobiographical documentary and, similarly to Hamilton, acknowledges the technological innovations that have allowed nearly all of us to become autobiographers. The internet, and social media sites like YouTube and Facebook, have enabled us to document our lives in writing and/or visual media to a worldwide audience. With smartphones, we walk in our society with our very own camera ready to capture in/significant events.

Jim Lane, writing about autobiography from an American point-of-view, makes a distinction between documentary film (not just biographical documentary) and those documentaries concerned with the autobiographical act when he states that 'the documentary impulse [is] to objectively record a historical world "out there" and [...] the autobiographical impulse [is] to subjectively record a private world "in here."'<sup>115</sup> As we have already mentioned, notions of objectivity and subjectivity are not so easily assigned. Nevertheless, what is apparent is an external/internal dialectic between the two variations. Therefore, we often find in autobiographical films, such as *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) and *My Winnipeg* (Guy Maddin, 2007), a recourse to performative techniques to represent the author/narrator/protagonist's psyche. The types of representation utilised and the ways they are used say a lot about the identity of the subject and will be explored more in chapter 2.

Some of the key critical issues with autobiography are similar to that of documentary in general, as I detailed in the 'definitions' section and that will be developed in the next chapter on autobiographical documentaries. The problem with historical authenticity is again raised:

[W]hereas the signifier in language has no relationship with the referent, and any written account of the past is necessarily a reconstruction (which does not prevent it from being read as truthful), film is capable of recording the real directly. When, therefore, the filmmaker restages scenes that took place in the past, their inauthenticity will be immediately obvious.<sup>116</sup>

The same can be said of those autobiographical documentaries – such as *Stories We Tell* – that recreate and/or re-present the filmmakers' childhood selves. Kate Douglas, writing about literary childhood autobiographies, also questions the nature of the relationship created between the

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<sup>114</sup> Michael Renov, 'Surveying the Subject: An Introduction' in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p.xi

<sup>115</sup> Jim Lane, 'Introduction' in *Autobiographical Documentary in America*, Madison (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p.4

<sup>116</sup> Edwards, Hubbell, Miller [eds.], 'Introduction: Textual and Visual Selves' in *Textual & Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography* (Lincoln [Neb.]: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), pp.12-13

author and their childhood selves.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, the negotiation of various stages of a person's life can create a plurality of authoring voices. How can documentaries reconcile this? Additionally, to what extent is the formulation in autobiographical literature and film that the narrator, extratextual author and textual self (selves) are the same (what Philippe Lejeune calls the 'autobiographical pact'<sup>118</sup>) that straightforward? These issues that are relevant to discussion on film autobiographies will be examined in the next chapter.

An oft-cited critical voice of autobiographical film is Elizabeth Bruss. She asserts that three parameters are characteristic of autobiographical writing:

Truth-value: An autobiography purports to be consistent with other evidence; we are conventionally invited to compare it with other documents that describe the same events (to determine its veracity) and with anything the author may have said or written on other occasions (to determine its sincerity).

Act-value: Autobiography is a personal performance, an action that exemplifies the character of the agent responsible for that action and how it is performed.

Identity-value: 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.<sup>119</sup>

Bruss explains how each of these parameters are undermined by the autobiographical film variant. Regarding 'truth-value', she posits that film images lack the specificities that language offers for the reader, such that the autobiographical writer can single out a specific object but the autobiographical filmmaker must also contend with upon what that object sits or what it sits next to in the frame.<sup>120</sup> The possibility of using voice-over to single out the desired object is, for Bruss, also problematic because of the variations and subtleties of every person's voice that might distract the viewer from a preferred reading.<sup>121</sup>

According to Bruss, the 'act-value' in autobiographical films is disrupted by the contrasting definitions and responsibilities of the author (in literature) and *auteur* (in film):

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<sup>117</sup> Kate Douglas, 'Authoring Childhood: The Road to Recovery and Redemption' in *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma and Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), p.67

<sup>118</sup> Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact' in *On Autobiography*, ed. John Paul Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp.3-30

<sup>119</sup> Elizabeth Bruss, 'Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film' in James Olney (ed.) *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, c1980), pp.299300

<sup>120</sup> Bruss, pp.301-302

<sup>121</sup> Bruss, pp.301-302

Authors must exercise their own capacities where auteurs are free to delegate; authors actually possess the abilities that auteurs need only oversee, and they fabricate what filmmakers may only need to find. This indiscretion and multiplicity, the fact that we cannot confidently treat everything in a film as the product of a single source or expect the same intimate involvement of the maker in the texture of what is finally made, leads to autobiographical paradox.<sup>122</sup>

It is interesting to note that Bruss fails to acknowledge how other ‘voices’ might play a part in autobiographical literature. Surely it is a rarity, except if they are blessed with an eidetic memory, that the author will be able to clearly recall and write about every single event of their lives. Presumably, other people will have been present at momentous occasions, such as weddings, funerals, etc. and the author will rightly want to gather their versions of events so as to better communicate their own recollections? Bruss, I think, has an overly-generalised impression of the differences between autobiographical literature and film.

The ‘identity-value’ of autobiography, where the author, narrator, and protagonist are the same, is negated, according to Bruss, when the filmmaker appears on screen. She describes such instances for the spectator of the autobiographical film as ‘a flash of vertigo, an eerie instant when “no one is in charge”’. <sup>123</sup> This view harks back to Bruss’s formulation of the film director as a person who can delegate other tasks to members of a team which therefore disqualifies the film as an autobiography. I find in this critique similarities to those early definitions of the documentary form which propose features that are, often, too stringent for productive and informed critical discussion. Bruss’s argument will be more closely examined in the next chapter, but for my research it is of less concern how authentic an autobiographical film is related to the subject’s life rather than how this life is represented to a spectator through elements of performance which contribute towards the autobiographer’s construction of their sense of self.

Hamilton concludes:

The truth is that real-life depiction— in myriad forms, from comic strip to essay, from obituaries to dramatized TV epics, from films to operas, from museum exhibitions to books, from radio profiles to film documentaries and blogs— is today the mark of our continuing fascination with individuality.<sup>124</sup>

Central to this ‘fascination with individuality’ is how a subject performs, both for themselves and an audience. I want to examine how this occurs in auto/biographical documentary through close

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<sup>122</sup> Bruss, p.304

<sup>123</sup> Bruss, p.309

<sup>124</sup> Hamilton, ‘Biography Today’, pp.287-289

analysis of case-study films. I now want to detail my methodology for this project and evaluate why my chosen approach is appropriate to my research.

## 1.5 Methodology

My main methodological approach to my thesis will be textual analysis, that is, close readings of auto/biographical documentaries. This approach lends itself well to my research area – an analysis into the ways auto/biographical subjects perform their identities and what impact these films have on a spectator situated in an increasingly performance-based society – because textual analysis is a ‘data-gathering process’ used ‘to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live.’<sup>125</sup> Film is a commodity which can be used by members of these cultures and subcultures to create meaning, make sense of an argument, or investigate their own identity. Auto/biographical documentaries, therefore, are the texts used either by a third party about a subject or by the subject themselves to engage with a specific identity.

Textual analysis is also useful due to its evidentiary status. Close reading of a film text’s *mise-en-scène*, lighting or music is evident for any reader to see – all they need to do is acquire a copy of the film and refer to the described section. For the development of my argument, therefore, I am able to provide clear examples in order to back up any claims I make. However, interpretation is unique. Not every viewer/reader will agree with all aspects of my project – that is the beauty of film criticism and other subjects from the wider humanities. Nevertheless, what I hope to achieve through textual analysis is a well-reasoned and logical investigation into performance within auto/biographical documentary film which is able to explore the form in an innovative and original way.

Due to the fact that identities are such heterogeneous entities, it is unsurprising that, over the course of my project, I have had to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. In addition to documentary studies (and more general areas of wider film studies) and performance theory, my research has led me into areas of social studies, linguistics, literary theory, the visual arts, psychoanalysis, ability studies, queer studies, and philosophical approaches to the self. My route along some of these discursive paths was very often determined by the documentary case-studies that ground the discussion of each chapter. The following thesis is structured around four

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<sup>125</sup> Alan McKee, ‘What is Textual Analysis?’ in *Textual Analysis: A Beginner’s Guide* (London, GBR: SAGE Publications Inc. (US), 2003), p.1

chapters (further information can be seen below), with each chapter critically examining a certain type of performance, or performative representation of, identity. Each chapter includes a detailed textual analysis of two or three case-study documentaries that provide evidence for discussion points and, in some cases, extend the present argument.

I have chosen to focus on documentaries from 2005 onwards. There is surely an interesting topic here which could examine how performance within earlier documentary texts relate to their specific cultural contexts. However, I have chosen the last fifteen years as my area of study, primarily, because of the technological developments of the internet, with its concurrent link to social media, and contemporary television's popular reality trend (including the 'constructed reality' sub-set which includes *The Only Way is Essex*, *Made in Chelsea* in the UK and other international variants) and the specific effects they have contributed to feature documentary output. The case-study films that are the subjects of each chapter were chosen to reflect a range of diverse voices and identities. There are North American and British films, European co-productions, and documentaries from the Middle East. There are forms of auto/biographical filmmaking by individuals with different ethnicities, genders and sexualities. I concede that this is not an exhaustive account of the various types of performance and/of identities one can find in documentary cinema. Rather, these films provide a glimpse into the ways many forms of non-fiction filmmaking display some of these identities onscreen.

I would like now to conclude this introduction with an outline of the chapters this project contains with details of the case-study films each will examine and the specific aims and questions each will investigate and attempt to answer.

## 1.6 Chapter Outline

**Chapter 2** will focus on autobiographical documentaries *My Winnipeg* (Guy Maddin, 2007), *Stories We Tell* (Sarah Polley, 2012) and *This is Not a Film* (Mojtaba Mirtahmasb & Jafar Panahi, 2011). These films are different to biographical documentaries because the subject of the text is also the author. As such, the creation of identity in these films is a very personal performance act and, in some cases, like *This is Not a Film*, an act of political importance.

Narrative is also a significant trope of these films. Clearly, an autobiographical documentary cannot, within reasonable and industrial time constraints, hope to document an entire life. Therefore, the structuring narrative framework is introduced, often in performative ways. The methods each documentarian/autobiographer uses to establish their identities will be the subject

of this chapter and will be supplemented with discussion on the ways the spectator can engage with their own identity construction within their society. The analysis of these films will explore how multiple versions of a ‘self’ are constructed and how public and private spaces are negotiated by the autobiographer in their identity performance.

**Chapter 3** builds upon the idea of multiple identities by analysing two different modes of performance – music and sport. This chapter will examine the different ways performance can be analysed in relation to the performer’s construction of identity. This will be achieved through two case-study films by British-Iranian documentary filmmaker, Asif Kapadia. *Amy* (2015) is a biographical assessment of the troubled life and career of the singer Amy Winehouse. *Senna* (2010) centres on Formula 1 racing champion, Ayrton Senna. Both died young amidst tragic circumstances and each were considered at the pinnacle of their respective fields based on their performances. However, ‘performance’ is expressed and assessed in very different ways in each of the films.

*Amy* has as its subject someone who is defined by their ability to engage in a direct performance. The documentary goes to great lengths to explain how Winehouse’s performance style makes her ‘special’ or ‘a star’. The quality of each performance is therefore inextricably bound to the singer’s worth or identity. Considering the popularity of television talent shows – such as *The X Factor* and *Britain’s Got Talent* (and its global variations) – this chapter will explore how films featuring musical performers generally, and *Amy* specifically, encourage the spectator to ‘judge’ each performance.

Performance means something different in films featuring sportsmen and sportswomen. Whereas musical performers engage in what we might call qualitative performance, where they seek to create a particular effect, we could say that sports personalities perform quantitatively, that is, measured against a set of values that will determine if they succeed or fail. Of course, the quality or how well they perform comes into it, but theirs is clearly not a performance that seeks to achieve an emotional connection in the main, even if this occurs for a spectator as a by-product of that performance. Furthermore, representations of Senna in the documentary often focus on the extreme lengths to which he pushes himself and the strain this has on the physical body. The majority of televisual sports coverage can slow down, freeze or replay action repeatedly. The body, therefore, is the subject of close inspection in many sports documentaries and will be examined through close analysis of Kapadia’s film.

Biographical documentaries featuring LGBTQ subjects frequently feature performance elements as their central representational framework due to the need for marginalised members of this group to become visible in a heteronormative society. It is present in the protests from the Stonewall riots in 1969 which helped ignite the gay rights movement in America. As was previously mentioned when referencing the theory of performative gender put forward by Judith Butler, queer-themed documentaries featuring drag acts or direct performance – such as case-study film *I Am Divine* (Jeffrey Schwartz, 2013) – engage in the representation of a blurred gender identity, the effects and implications of which will be the subject of **Chapter 4**.

Additionally, Robert Mapplethorpe's identity in *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* (Fenton Bailey & Randy Barbato, 2016) is related to performance and surfaces in his dual roles of observer/photographer and participant/subject when he became part of his photos, engaged in explicit same sex acts he asked his subjects to perform. This would continue right up to his death from AIDS when he was photographed by his younger brother in profile with a skull-mounted walking cane. Identity, then, is constructed and defined as it is performed. Furthermore, in this chapter, as Thomas Waugh rightly describes, the process of 'coming out' which has become essential in the development of identity for LGBTQ people, is itself a performative utterance.<sup>126</sup> "I am out" becomes a phrase which performs and defines a particular identity which is closely linked to the way an individual performs in society and in private.

Finally, in **Chapter 5** I will examine some biographical documentaries which introduce what I term 'reflexive strategies'. By this, I mean techniques which draw the spectator's attention to the documentary filmmaking process with intriguing effects. Reflexivity has been a part of documentary tradition throughout its history (and is present in the other documentaries I am discussing). However, the case-studies under investigation in this chapter put their reflexive techniques to use in the aid of a distinctly aesthetic, performative agenda. Whether it is animation in *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008), or lip-synced performances by actors to their real-person counterparts in *The Arbor* (Clio Barnard, 2010) and *Notes on Blindness* (Peter Middleton and James Spinney, 2016), each creates a particular effect for the spectator to remind them that what they are watching is a carefully constructed performance, which is essential to the identity of the documentary subject as well as the film viewer's own negotiation of 'self' in daily life.

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<sup>126</sup> Thomas Waugh, 'Lesbian and Gay Documentary: Minority Self-Imaging, Oppositional Film Practice, and the Question of Image Ethics (1984)' in *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p.195

My research provides an original and innovative way to explore the contemporary documentary landscape. Nichols, Renov, Bruzzi et al. provide the critical foundations for this project in their discussions about the objective/subjective representational debate and how performance impacts upon the veracity or 'truth claims' of these documentaries. To be clear, this is not what my research aims to do. Rather, I am proposing that performance – and the performative effects this visual strategy produces – is being increasingly used by documentary filmmakers who wish to engage with the film spectator. After all, the interactive and participatory viewing cultures that Web 2.0 and 3.0 continue to encourage in everyday society means that spectators are continually sharing digital portraits on social media platforms as both a snapshot of the identity they wish others to see and the identity they are (performatively) constructing for themselves. Contemporary documentary film is responding to these viewing cultures and imagines an audience who understand how they 'work'. My research thus bridges the critical gap these technological and cultural changes have created.

The case-study films I have chosen offer useful and accessible routes into the key issues I will be analysing. Where possible, I have selected documentaries that are well-known and have been successful at finding audiences (both *Senna* and *Amy* performed well at the UK box-office and garnered international awards and critical acclaim) so that the reader might be familiar with the texts and therefore be able to engage more easily with the discussions. However, other texts have been chosen precisely because of their more complex representational strategies and I hope that my analysis of them will interest and inspire the reader to revisit them or seek them out for the first time. Either way, these films demonstrate the inventive and exciting current developments in documentary production and the proceeding chapters offer detailed and insightful analyses into the way filmmakers are addressing their audience.





## Chapter 2    Autobiography

“[T]he subject *in* documentary has, to a surprising degree, become the subject *of* documentary.”

Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*<sup>127</sup>

This chapter is about autobiographical documentaries, that is, films where the ostensible filmmaker and film subject are the same. By analysing three contemporary case-study films – *My Winnipeg* (Guy Maddin, 2007), *This is Not a Film* (Mojtaba Mirtahmasb & Jafar Panahi, 2011) and *Stories We Tell* (Sarah Polley, 2012) – the discussion will focus on how the autobiographer/filmmaker sets about constructing their identities through the use of various performance strategies. Textual analysis reveals that the subjects *of* each of these documentaries (following on from the above quote from Renov) negotiate their representations of ‘self’ according to stylistic characteristics which can be grouped into two distinct themes. I have called these ‘a plurality of selves’ and ‘internal/external, private/public spaces’. I will define these classifications before analysing the films. However, I must first clarify what is meant by ‘autobiography.’ Just as autobiographical documentary is an offshoot of documentary, this form has its variations. Therefore, I will begin by defining how this example of documentary filmmaking is the same as, or different from, other forms of first-person documentaries.

A useful way to approach a definition of autobiographical documentary is offered by literary critic Philippe Lejeune and his description of ‘the autobiographical pact’ between the reader and the text. The understanding here is that the narrator/‘voice’, or author of the text, and textual subject are the same person.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, for the autobiographical documentaries discussed in this chapter, the filmmaker is making a film about themselves, or an aspect of their life, where their ‘voice’ – be that voiceover narration, editing, cinematography, choice of music – will be clearly discerned.

As we shall see, this theorisation may be complicated by autobiographical documentary. For instance, does ‘the autobiographical pact’ allow for a plurality of authoring voices, for example, from different stages in a person’s life? Surely an individual’s interpretation of an event as a child will differ greatly when remembered as an adult and, likewise, when the person is in old age. Additionally, changes in living environment and external social/cultural factors will come to bear

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<sup>127</sup> Michael Renov, ‘Surveying the Subject: An Introduction’ in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p.xxiv

<sup>128</sup> Lejeune, pp.3-30

on the individual subject. Criticisms of Lejeune's formulation and how it stands up once transposed to autobiographical documentary will be addressed later in this chapter. However, for now it provides a foundation from which to explain other forms of autobiography in documentary; 'personal essay', 'self-biography' and 'domestic ethnography'.

Like autobiographical documentary, personal essay films will be reflective and subjective.<sup>129</sup> This is due to the presence of the filmmaker, often on-camera, who will typically investigate a topic or theme that is personally significant in some way. Key to the personal essay film, as the name suggests, is the significance given to words. Phillip Lopate elaborates:

An essay film must have words, in the form of a text, either spoken, subtitled, or intertitled"; "The text must represent a single voice"; "The text must represent and attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem"; "The text must impart more than information; it must have a strong, personal point of view"; "The text's language should be as eloquent, well written and interesting as possible."<sup>130</sup>

Alain Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard/Night and Fog* (1955) is a good example in the way it melds poetic, elegiac written prose (written and read by concentration camp survivor, Jean Cayrol) with elegant tracking shots of the camp. Resnais does not appear in the film itself, however his presence exists in the organisation of narration and image, space and time as the film transitions from contemporary colour footage to archive newsreel.

Recent examples could include more 'visible' filmmakers such as Nick Broomfield, Louis Theroux and Michael Moore. Each is a dominant presence in their films, orchestrating a debate on an issue. As can be seen from these examples, personal essay films need not be 'about' the filmmaker themselves, but instead how the director feels about or has been affected by the issue under discussion. Indeed, with Moore, whose documentaries take aim at large corporate institutions and right-wing groups (*Roger and Me* [1989], *Bowling for Columbine* [2001], *Capitalism: A Love Story* [2009]), George W. Bush (*Fahrenheit 9/11* [2003]) and US healthcare (*Sicko* [2007]), even more crucial to his approach is the role he assigns to the spectator, another key component of the personal essay form:

[T]he enunciator addresses the spectator directly, and attempts to establish a dialogue. The "I" of the essay film always clearly and strongly implicates a "you" - and this is a key aspect of the deep structures of the form. "You" is called upon to participate and share the enunciator's reflections. It is important to understand that this "you" is not a generic audience, but an embodied spectator.

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<sup>129</sup> Laura Rascaroli, 'The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments' in *Framework*, Vol. XLIX, Issue 2, 2008, pp.24-47

<sup>130</sup> Phillip Lopate, 'In Search of the Centaur' in *Totally, Tenderly, Tragically* (Amsterdam: Anchor, 1998) cited in Rascaroli, pp.24-47

The essay film constructs such a spectatorial position by adopting a certain rhetorical structure: rather than answering all the questions that it raises, and delivering a complete, "closed" argument, the essay's rhetoric is such that it opens up problems, and interrogates the spectator; instead of guiding her through emotional and intellectual response, the essay urges her to engage individually with the film, and reflect on the same subject matter the author is musing about. This structure accounts for the "openness" of the essay film.<sup>131</sup>

One finds that this active spectator of the personal essay film is less common in autobiographical documentary. In the three case-studies I discuss in this chapter – *My Winnipeg*, *This is Not a Film* and *Stories We Tell* – the viewer may wish to consider their own hometown and its effect on their identity, the way they would feel under house arrest, or the way their own family deals with memory (the respective themes each film explores), but this will not usually be central to the viewing experience.

At first glance 'self-biography' could be considered synonymous with autobiography, where 'self' and 'auto' can be interchangeable. However, whereas in autobiographical documentary the film is usually about and made by the same person, in self-biographies the subject in question will 'exert significant control over the content and tone of the biography', but they will not 'direct, edit, or perform the technical aspects of its production.'<sup>132</sup> As such, for Audrey Levasseur, this form of documentary is defined by the extent to which the subject participates in the film:

Unlike biography, where the subject is present only in photographic stills, family movies, archival film footage, and excerpts from past writings, in self-biography the subject's most powerful instruments are his or her performing identity and present self-performance. Not only is the subject thus able directly to influence audience perceptions, but by controlling access to family, friends, and vital records, he or she may indirectly influence the style of the director's presentation as well. The overall effect of self-biography may be more univocal than multivocal, leading some critics to complain that the effect of the work is a canonization or hagiography that lacks depth of analysis.<sup>132</sup>

The critics of self-biography, to which Levasseur refers, are underestimating the potential for autobiographers to do the same. The implication is that, in the case of the autobiographer, it is their self to represent whereas the director of a self-biography should bring the subject's life story that they are telling under their control. A significant issue for all kinds of biographical documentary is the question of ownership.

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<sup>131</sup> Rascaroli, pp.24-47

<sup>132</sup> Audrey Levasseur, 'Film and Video Self-Biographies' in *Biography*, Vol.23, Issue 1, 2000, p.179 <sup>132</sup> Levasseur, p.179

Levasseur cites 'performing identity' and 'social identity' as defined by Erving Goffman as another feature of self-biography. The former is the presentation of the self, offered by the individual, and the latter the identity others construct of a person based on their prior knowledge of the individual.<sup>133</sup> To explain further, let us look at a recent example of this form of auto/biographical documentary - *20,000 Days on Earth* (Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard, 2014).

Its subject is Australian musician Nick Cave and, as the title suggests, it deals with a fictionalised 20,000<sup>th</sup> day that he spends on planet Earth. The project started out when Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds were recording a new record and they invited filmmakers Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard along to document some of their sessions. Seeing the footage, the trio decided to put it to use in a wider frame but did not want to make a 'traditional' documentary. The result is a lyrical meditation on life, the creative process and memory co-written by Cave which is interspersed with the recording session footage, live performance and the Bad Seed driving around Brighton (now his hometown) speaking with – what are perhaps most accurately described as – 'manifestations' of some of his professional collaborators. These include Blixa Bargeld, Ray Winstone and Kylie Minogue.

The negotiation of personal/social identity is particularly resonant in a sequence involving Minogue. She defines Cave's social identity when recounting her first memory of seeing him onstage: his walk; swagger; and appearance as "tree-like", which prompts a surprised expression from Cave in the driver's seat as he watches and listens to Minogue reflected in the rear-view mirror. The film then cuts to a live performance with Cave where we are invited to consider Minogue's comments as the frontman performs his personal identity, which he has previously described as being intense and aimed at connecting with individual members of the audience. We see him kneeling, clasping the hand of a female audience member.

These scenes also demonstrate the film's heightened reflexivity. Cave discusses his performance style quite openly, much of the action occurs in artificial sets (a 'Nick Cave Archive', a specially-designed office and the car he drives is being towed) and the 'manifests' Cave speaks to seem to appear and disappear out of nowhere. The conversations and confessions are not scripted, but they take place within rigorously controlled scenarios. The film perpetuates the myth Nick Cave and 'Nick Cave' have created and the spectator can consider the various representations the notoriously enigmatic figure provides. *20,000 Days on Earth* demonstrates that self-biography is a hybrid form. It is perhaps best defined as existing in the middle of a spectrum where 'biography' sits at one end and 'autobiography' on the other.

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<sup>133</sup> Erving Goffman, 'Information Control and Personal Identity', *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), pp.74-75

Located further towards ‘autobiography’ on this hypothetical spectrum is ‘domestic ethnography’. As theorised by Michael Renov, this is a form of autobiography which examines the relationship between relatives or close friends and the filmmaker where the ‘result is self-portraiture refracted through a familial ‘Other’’.<sup>134</sup> Consequently, the construction of identity by the autobiographer is situated – and indeed defined – amongst a variety of other performing identities. For Renov, this has the following outcome:

Because the lives of artist and subject are interlaced through communal or blood ties, the documentation of the one tends to implicate the other in complicated ways; indeed, consanguinity and co(i)mplication are domestic ethnography’s defining features. By co(i)mplication I mean both complexity and the interpenetration of subject/object identities. To pursue the point yet further, one could say that domestic ethnography is a kind of supplementary autobiographical practice; it functions as a vehicle of self-examination, a means through which to construct self-knowledge through recourse to the familial other.<sup>135</sup>

These films involve a sort of ‘identity sleuthing’ that, by the very presence of close, personal contacts can become ‘highly charged investigations brimming with a curious brand of epistephilia, a brew of affection, resentment, even self-loathing’.<sup>136</sup> Jonathan Caouette’s *Tarnation* (2003) is one such example. An even more relevant instance is *Stories We Tell*, to be discussed here, which not only deals with the relationships between Sarah Polley and her family, but also her very origins. But what about the origins of autobiography, firstly as a form of artistic creation, and then its application to documentary film? When and why did it develop?

It is difficult to fix a precise date to the beginning of the autobiographical impulse. Some scholars, such as Nigel Hamilton, theorise that it had been part of some of the oldest known civilisations, with cave paintings providing a personal document of early human life.<sup>137</sup> Others, like Renov, believe western autobiography to have begun with the confessional letters of Augustine in the late fourth century.<sup>138</sup> Regardless of the exact date autobiography first began to emerge, it is clear that one of the most sustained periods of interest in the individuality behind the creative process occurred across Europe in the fifteenth century during the Renaissance.

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<sup>134</sup> Michael Renov, ‘First Person Film: Some Theses on Self-Inscription’ in Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong, eds., *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices* (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press, 2008), p.44

<sup>135</sup> Michael Renov, ‘Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the “Other” Self’ in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p.218

<sup>136</sup> Renov, p.218

<sup>137</sup> Nigel Hamilton, ‘Prologue’ in *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.8

<sup>138</sup> Michael Renov, ‘Surveying the Subject: An Introduction’ in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p.xi

At this time, painting and sculpture were typically considered crafts. In other words, these were projects made by a group of workers who were regulated by different guilds based on their profession.<sup>139</sup> However, due to a number of contemporary social and cultural factors (including the notoriety of artists such as Michelangelo, Raphael and Benvenuto Cellini, who self-consciously sought patronage from the upper classes and royalty, as well as the important function that literary biographies provided in documenting the lives of these artists<sup>140</sup>), it was also a period in which the idea of the artist as a distinct individual and who possessed an innate genius began to take hold. So much so that art historian William E. Wallace commented that the 'rise of the artist, from craftsman to genius, from artisan to gentleman is one of the signal achievements and principal legacies of the Renaissance'.<sup>141</sup>

Perhaps the most significant factor in this focus on the 'artist-as-genius' though was the artist's own self-presentation in their work; it was a move 'to claim genius for oneself'.<sup>142</sup> H. Perry Chapman elucidates on the distinctive nature of the 'self-portrait':

The self-portrait had acquired a mystique, because the artist had come to be regarded as a special person with a special gift. The topos "every painter paints himself" conveyed the idea that a painter invariably put something of him/herself into his/her art. More than any other kind of artistic creation, the self-portrait was regarded as a manifestation of the artist's ineffable presence in the work.<sup>143</sup>

However, this was not a simple example of self-presentation. Rather, as Goffman would develop centuries later, the figures contained within these paintings or sculptures represented assorted attempts by the artist to reflect, project, change or construct what they understood to be their identity in terms of their creative process.<sup>144</sup> In this sense, it is interesting to note that self-portraiture developed alongside early modern forms of autobiographical literature, such as the work of French essayist Michel de Montaigne, who famously wrote not in order to 'pretend to discover things, but to lay open my self.'<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> William E. Wallace, 'The Artist as Genius' in Bohn & Saslow (eds.) *A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p.2298j

<sup>140</sup> Wallace, p.2298j

<sup>141</sup> Wallace, p.2298j

<sup>142</sup> Wallace, p.2298j

<sup>143</sup> H. Perry Chapman, 'Self-Portraiture 1400-1700' in Bohn & Saslow (eds.) *A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p.37n

<sup>144</sup> Chapman, p.37n

<sup>145</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton, 3rd. ed. (London: Printed for M. Gillyflower et al., 1700), p.254

Figure 1: *Las Meninas* by Diego Velazquez (1656)

Figure 2: *Stories We Tell* (Sarah Polley, 2012)

Taking one of Wallace's case-study examples, Diego Velázquez's 'Las Meninas' from 1656 (Figure 1), we can observe the complexities inherent in some forms of self-portraiture. The painting portrays members of the royal family and attendants in a room of the Royal Alcazar of Madrid. Some of the figures interact with one another and others appear to stare out at us, as the viewer. In the background there is an open door with a person standing on some steps looking into the room and on the back wall there is a mirror which reflects the image of the king and queen. Their figures do not appear in the frame of the painting itself, and because the artist is seen standing at his easel to the left of the picture, gazing at us, brush in hand, we are led to believe that they are the subjects of his latest work and are stood somewhere behind 'us' as the viewer.

The work's multiple depths of field, the various subjectivities being utilised, and its unusual composition distinguish it as a highly reflexive piece, which seems to suggest that the artist and his process is the most important aspect, more important even than royalty. Here we see a clear example of the autobiographical impulse; that of the artist placing themselves in their art. And it appears that it is an impulse that can be traced through to twenty first-century documentary filmmaking. Figure 2 shows a still from Polley's *Stories We Tell*. At first glance, one notices the similarities in purpose; the drive to self-document and, in so doing, to draw attention to the fact that what the viewer is seeing is carefully constructed and reveals aspects of its maker's attitude,

personality and identity. By carefully analysing these texts, we can better observe and understand that 'representing oneself is as much about self-projection as it is about self-reflection'.<sup>146</sup>

Arguably, we can trace autobiographical documentary back to the early days of film form. Some of the Lumières' early actualities, Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and Joris Ivens' short films *De brug/The Bridge* (1928) and *Regen/Rain* (1929) each display an autobiographical impulse to varying degrees, either by the filmmaker appearing in their films or through avant-garde poeticism in montage and editing. However, according to Jim Lane, autobiographical documentary established itself, in America at least, during the late 1960s.<sup>147</sup> Lane identifies three influences which came to bear on autobiographical documentary's appearance: American avant-garde film and independent cinema; reaction to the dominant observational/direct cinema tradition; and European experimental film (e.g. French New Wave and *cinéma vérité*).

The emergence of avant-garde film in the US necessitated that these filmmakers turn 'to alternative modes of production, namely, minimal crew or single-person shooting and editing' which subsequently led to 'non-commercial autobiographical themes, specifically the everyday events and domestic scenes of the filmmakers' lives'.<sup>148</sup> Their difference to the American mainstream cinema meant that these films were largely independently produced and distributed and were therefore free from the perceived restrictions associated with Hollywood.

As has already been mentioned, the 1960s American documentary landscape was dominated by direct cinema and its aim to capture everyday reality without the obvious presence of the filmmaker or the filmmaking apparatus. Autobiographical documentaries that surfaced during this decade can be seen as a direct response to the observational form due to their 'repositioning [of] the filmmaker at the foreground of the film' and the subjectivity and reflexivity this entails.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, Lane attributes the reflexive nature of autobiographical film as being indebted to the experimental tradition in Europe at this time where knowing strategies would be applied in order to 'represent the private everyday world of the filmmaker'.<sup>150</sup> This drive to express the internal thoughts of the filmmaker, by the filmmaker, is a key component of the autobiographical documentary to be found in each of the films under discussion in this chapter.

Some other factors, which Lane does not mention but are significant for the development of the autobiographical documentary, are worthy of note. Firstly, technological advances concomitant

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<sup>146</sup> Chapman, p.37n

<sup>147</sup> Jim Lane, 'Introduction' in *Autobiographical Documentary in America*, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p.4

<sup>148</sup> Lane, 'The Convergence of Autobiography and Documentary', pp.11-12

<sup>149</sup> Lane, pp.11-12

<sup>150</sup> Lane, pp.11-12

with the late 1960s 'boom' in first-person recording are telling. At the end of the decade Sony released the first 'Portable Battery-Operated Video Rover', the first video portapack which was more mobile and compact than previous cameras. As McLane describes, 'recording time was 20 minutes on a 4 ½ inch reel of 11/2 inch videotape. A small hand crank was stored in the unit's lid for rewinding the tape. Playback of tapes (after they were hand rewound) was on separate decks.'<sup>151</sup> Cheaper and easier to use, the transition from film to video made the filmmaking process more accessible and meant that anyone (or anyone who had the means) from a budding filmmaker to the average family could make films. Of course, with digital, this continues today. Armed with smartphones and easily downloadable editing software, Facebook and YouTube accounts, aren't we all autobiographers, able to shoot, cut and exhibit our personal life stories?

Secondly, the burgeoning Civil Rights movement and the activism this promoted was echoed in documentary production with filmmakers recording their personal experiences amidst shifting cultural and societal landscapes. According to McLane, '[t]he social issues that forged identities' for this generation of filmmakers included 'gay rights, black power, feminism, the American Vietnam War, spiritual enlightenment, rock 'n' roll, environmentalism, drug use, and youth culture'.<sup>152</sup> Directors and activist groups made documentaries dealing with this subject matter as a way to let 'previously unheard voices' speak for themselves.<sup>153</sup> Key texts include *The Murder of Fred Hampton* (Howard Alk, 1971), *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis, 1974), *Word is Out* (Nancy Adair, Andrew Brown & Rob Epstein, 1977) and *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (Connie Field, 1982). Race, sexual orientation, and political allegiances are all important identity-markers and will unsurprisingly be a central focus for the autobiographical filmmaker. Films such as these can even be considered as part of the familial, domestic ethnography variant of autobiography, as theorised by Renov, in that these communities are 'families we choose', which stand in for, or exist alongside, their biological counterparts.<sup>154</sup>

More general critical, ideological and political shifts occurred during these decades in societies where capitalism was king, which determined how documentary representations of the 'self' were defined. Postmodernism altered the way critics, writers and viewers thought about their 'reality', with Jean Baudrillard's notion of the 'simulacrum' destabilising the assumption that the world

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<sup>151</sup> Betsy A. McLane, 'Video Arrives' in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.272

<sup>152</sup> McLane, 'The 1970s : Power to the People', p.267

<sup>153</sup> McLane, p.267

<sup>154</sup> Kath Weston, 'The Politics of Gay Families' in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, revised edn, ed. Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), p.137

around us is fixed and unchanging.<sup>155</sup> This view consequently impacted upon how we, as 'selves' and consumers, moved and interacted with the world around us. Fredric Jameson explains:

[D]istance in general (including "critical distance" in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism. We are submerged in its henceforth filled and suffused volumes to the point where our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distantiation'.<sup>156</sup>

Understandably, this has led to critics proclaiming that the modernist (and earlier) view of identity as a fixed and stable concept ended with postmodernism.<sup>157</sup> Instead of a unified single self, we own or become different 'selves' in response to the increasingly fragmented social sphere we inhabit. For its part, cinema, and the dominant function it has performed throughout its history, held up a mirror to this postmodern society and itself to tell film stories that were aware 'of their own coming into being'.<sup>158</sup> For example, considering a film such as Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven* (2002) one notices its carefully constructed 1950s setting. However, it also consolidates cinematic representations of post-WWII American suburbia, such as the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, to present a story taking place in "the 1950s", the quotation marks here indicating an ideological, even conceptual, interpretation of the decade based on individual memories, cultural artefacts, and films.<sup>159</sup>

However, contrary to the view that postmodernism caused a crisis of identity, other critics interpret this subjective instability as an opportunity for us to explore other possibilities for our 'self':

My analyses thus suggest that in a postmodern image culture, the images, scenes, stories, and cultural texts of media culture offer a wealth of subject positions which in turn help structure individual identity. These images project role and gender models, appropriate and inappropriate forms of behaviour(sic), style and fashion, and subtle enticements to emulate and identify with certain identities while avoiding others. Rather than identity disappearing in a postmodern society, it is merely subject to new determinations and new forces while offering as well new possibilities, styles, models, and forms. Yet the overwhelming variety of possibilities for identity in an affluent image culture no doubt creates highly unstable identities while constantly providing new openings to restructure one's identity.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p.48

<sup>156</sup> Jameson, pp48-49

<sup>157</sup> Jameson, pp48-49

<sup>158</sup> Jameson, p.288

<sup>159</sup> Jameson, p.288

<sup>160</sup> Douglas Kellner, 'Television, Advertising, and the Construction of Postmodern Identities' in *Media*

Furthermore, for theorists of neoliberalism, which has experienced renewed interest in recent years following the 2008/09 global financial crisis, this sense of instability is supposed to be normal and is imagined to be an environment in which a person can succeed and thrive regardless of gender, ethnicity, or social class.<sup>161</sup> This is a ‘flattening’ of identity and it envisions an entrepreneurial everyman/woman operating within deregulated and privatised economic conditions. Regardless of one’s school of thought, it is possible to identify trends in recent autobiographical documentaries that actively and self-consciously question, problematise and construct the filmmaker’s identity/ies. To summarise then, autobiographical documentaries – and their variants discussed above – are usually highly reflexive texts which might utilise decidedly subjective, expressive representational strategies and feature a variety of different performances (be that by the filmmaker/autobiographer, subjects the director interviews, or hired actors for re-enactments) put to use for the significant purpose of constructing identity. Therefore, two important discursive frameworks emerge for autobiographical documentary through which I will discuss three case-study films – *My Winnipeg*, *This is Not a Film*, and *Stories We Tell*. I have called these ‘A Plurality of Selves’ and ‘Internal/External, Private/Public Spaces’.

## 2.1 A Plurality of Selves

Michael Renov, in his introduction to *The Subject in Documentary*, offers a complication of what exactly we mean by ‘self’:

[...] it is no singular self, as any declension shows: I, me, the ego, the self, the subject, the individual, the citizen. The trouble with the subject has quite a history [...] Is the subject merely a bourgeois category that occludes our view of class struggle, the arena that really counts (classical Marxism)? [...] Is the subject merely an effect of the system (structuralism and Lacanianism)? [...] Has the subject been so decentred, hybridized, and now virtualized that it ceases to support a meaningful sense of self (poststructuralism, cyber-theory)? Or is this absorption in the self a symptom of narcissism, a massive defense of the ego locatable in the artists or in society at large (psychology)? Is the subject abstract or concrete [...] These divergent visions of subjectivity in the late twentieth century collectively limn the contours of contemporary cultural theory.<sup>162</sup>

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*Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.257

<sup>161</sup> Matt Dawson, ‘Introduction: The (In)Compatibility of Socialism and Late Modernity’ in *Late Modernity, Individualization and Socialism: An Associational Critique of Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.6

<sup>162</sup> Renov, pp.xiii-xiv



In short, my discussion will comment upon all of the above. In autobiographical documentary, the representation of the filmmaker's 'self' is central to the process and necessitates a meditation on the director's own interpretation of their personal identity as well as positioning the spectator to create a social identity for this person. As we shall see in the case-study films, this might also involve the spectator considering their own identity as part of the viewing process. In either case, all three films construct pluralised 'selves' in a variety of intriguing ways.

Guy Maddin's *My Winnipeg* is a self-proclaimed 'docu-fantasia' of his hometown in Manitoba, Canada. The film is fashioned out of memories of childhood and curious historical events that may have happened in the city's past. The film's aesthetics are a mixture of archive and constructed footage, which is made to resemble film from the late-silent/early-sound period – Maddin's preferred film style in most of his work – with black and white, scratched visuals and imaginative use of intertitles. This is all accompanied by a voiceover from Maddin.

Multiple selves are apparent from early on in the film. The re-enacted scenes feature recurring sequences on a train setting with the character 'Guy' (played by Maddin's frequent onscreen muse, Darcy Fehr) drifting in and out of sleep, pressed up against the carriage's window with exterior landscapes artificially back-projected. Maddin's narration explains that 'Guy' is trying to leave Winnipeg but without any success. The city seems to have a hold over him. This might also be linked to 'Guy's' domineering 'Mother' figure (played by Ann Savage), who in surreal gigantic form peers into the train carriage as 'Guy' dreams. In a last-ditch effort to leave, Maddin has an idea: 'what if I film my way out of here?!" He returns to his childhood home (which doubled up as his Mother's hair salon), hires actors to play his siblings (he was the youngest of two brothers and one sister) and his deceased Father is exhumed under the carpet in the living room so that he can recreate moments from the memories of his early years. As can already be seen, *My Winnipeg* is no straightforward autobiographical text. The life narrative offered up by the filmmaker is kept at an imaginative distance precisely because key 'characters' in Maddin's life are played by actors, including himself. Their performances subsequently mean that there is more than one 'self' represented at any given time. Let us first take Guy Maddin as an example.

To begin with, there is Guy Maddin the filmmaker, who can be heard off-camera giving notes to Ann Savage playing his Mother. There is also Guy Maddin the narrator. Even here, the spoken text reveals a dialectical presentation which contrasts the lyrical delivery of Maddin's personal memories often in repeated triplets – 'Urine. Breast milk. Sweat', 'White. Block. House' – and the more direct, declarative tone in his description of some of the strange history of Winnipeg. Finally, there is the 'Guy Maddin' character played by Fehr who has embodied versions of the filmmaker or appeared in some of Maddin's other films; *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003),

*Cowards Bend the Knee* or *The Blue Hands* (2003), *Keyhole* (2011) and *The Forbidden Room* (2015). Consequently, spectators who are familiar with Maddin's oeuvre may well use Fehr's appearance in *My Winnipeg* as a site of intertextual knowledge. Darren Wershler has described the use of 'Guy Maddin' in Maddin's films:

The doppelgängers that populate Maddin's films are indolent cowards, mama's boys, philanderers, and murderers. What is interesting is not whether these figures are somehow 'accurate' reflections of the director's personality, but how Maddin uses them to display his fantasies onscreen.<sup>163</sup>

The fantasy this version of Maddin displays in *My Winnipeg* is a desire to escape the city. However, in comparison to the fictional films where Maddin's cipher appears, this 'Guy' is passive, mute and a substitute for Maddin, the filmmaker behind the camera. As a result, we could say that Maddin's depiction of his self by using Fehr-as-Maddin in this way exemplifies a desire for control over his own representation which results in a pluralised identity. Whether this is a matter of style or of cowardice – a way for Maddin to hide behind his onscreen muse – is a point of contention and will be debated alongside his singular aesthetics later in the chapter.

Intertextual knowledge is also called upon by the casting of Ann Savage as Maddin's Mother. Savage came out of a fifty-year retirement from acting to appear in the film and is perhaps best known for playing the femme fatale, Vera, in Edgar G. Ulmer's poverty-row picture, *Detour* (1945). Maddin has said that he cast her specifically because of his fondness for her performance as 'the most frightening femme fatale in the history of film noir.'<sup>164</sup> Therefore, for the attentive spectator recognising Savage, her performance as Maddin's overbearing Mother translates this autobiographical documentary into something more like a nightmare noir.

However, Maddin, as part of his playful, pluralised approach towards identities in the film, does not inform us that Savage is an actress performing a role – as he does for the other actors playing family members – instead always referring to her as 'Mother'. In fact, Maddin's mother was alive at the time the film was being made and was a minor actress on Canadian television in a serial called 'Ledge Man' (which is featured in *My Winnipeg*), so one might ask; why was Maddin's biological Mother not cast to play herself? Is this again to do with control from Maddin's point of view? I believe an answer is offered by an effort to deliberately position the spectator on unstable representational ground.

This results in a curious moment in the documentary where Maddin the narrator comments upon the progress of his autobiographical process. Over shots of them laying in the snow, Maddin

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<sup>163</sup> Darren Wershler, 'Transfusions: Biography and Filmography' in *Guy Maddin's My Winnipeg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p.17

<sup>164</sup> Maddin quoted in Jason Horsley, 'Obsessions into Light: an interview with Guy Maddin', *Cineaste*, Vol.XXXIII, Issue 4, Fall 2008, pp.47-49

explains that, as a result of the re-enactments, his 'Mother' has grown attached to her dead son, Cameron, "or at least for Brandon who played him". In this brief sequence, elements combine to reveal the varying layers of performance and identity that are apparent in the film. As well as Maddin performing the spoken word in his narration, Savage is playing the role of Maddin's Mother acting alongside Brandon-as-Cameron in a staged scene which enacts a fantasy from Maddin's imagination. A complex representation indeed. Perhaps the best way to describe this approach to memory and identity through performance is offered by Maddin in the film, when recounting one of Winnipeg's curious city laws. It is illegal to destroy city signs even if they have become obsolete. Maddin's voiceover thus defines his hometown as "a city of palimpsests, city of skins."

A palimpsest is an apt definition in that, like the document or parchment whose writing has been partially or wholly written over by another piece of text, Maddin's replacing of the 'real' family members with actors represents his own, favoured version of his childhood from his memory and/or imagination. The visual metaphor provided by 'Garbage Hill', the city's dump which was grassed over to make a park, which appears later in the film, is a telling insertion and seems to say that in Winnipeg and *My Winnipeg*, appearances can be deceiving.

It is significant to note, as Wershler has, that the theme of multiple identity exists beyond the film itself. Taking his cue from Marjorie Perloff's definition of 'differential media', where knowledge of a text exists across different channels all of which contribute to our understanding of it, Wershler explains the multiple versions of Maddin's *My Winnipeg*:

Thinking about *My Winnipeg* necessarily involves the film (with and without live narration), but also the book, the DVD and its various related short films and commentary tracks, the official website, links between this film and Maddin's two other autobiographical films, his two books, and an installation at the Power Plant, without either attributing symmetry between various versions of the object or assigning primacy to any particular one of them.<sup>165</sup>

All of these versions might offer up nuanced differences or divergences from each other. However, the important thing to consider here is how each version of the text reflects a fragment of Maddin's autobiographical process; one piece of a larger jigsaw puzzle.

*My Winnipeg* has prompted critics to consider the film not only in relation to Maddin's autobiography, but also as a way of describing his role in the wider arena of Canadian filmmakers and the depiction of a national identity onscreen. The latter is often perceived to be constantly overshadowed by Canada's southern neighbours, the United States. It is quite common for

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<sup>165</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "‘Vocabular Scriptsigns’: Differential Poetics in Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Fidget*” in *Fidget* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 2000), pp.90-107 cited in Darren Wershler, p.10

commentators to define the legacy of Canadian culture in film as undergoing an identity crisis.<sup>166</sup> For John Semley, Maddin's films in general - and I argue *My Winnipeg* specifically - are engaged in a form of 'myth-making'.<sup>167</sup> In the way Maddin plays 'fast and loose' with the facts of his origins (he says in voiceover that he was born in the locker room of his beloved ice hockey team stadium) and the insistent gaze back in history of Winnipeg, the filmmaker seems to be trying to reclaim not only his own history but that of his hometown itself.

Furthermore, it is notable that Maddin's version of documentary – or 'docu-fantasia', as he calls it – is so at odds with Canada's historical documentary legacy. The style and purpose of documentary as part of the National Film Board under the direction of John Grierson (who moved from Britain to take up the post) emphasised expositional content and sought to educate and inform the general public. Could it therefore be argued that Maddin, in his radical departure from this documentary 'style' which 'largely eschews the traditional Canadian allegiances to realism or direct cinema', is attempting to re-write the identity generally attributed to Canadian documentary?<sup>168</sup>

The fluidity and variety of identity is explored in the autobiographical work of another Canadian filmmaker. Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* is engaged in answering one of the fundamental questions of autobiography; that of origins – 'Where do I come from?' Polley does this by gathering family members and close friends of her mother Diane. Diane died from cancer when Sarah was eleven years old and she was subsequently brought up by her father Michael in a family environment which included her elder brother and sister and half-siblings from Diane's previous marriage. It was during this time that Sarah became the punchline to a family joke, namely, that she did not look anything like Michael. This clearly stayed with Sarah as she grew up, in the meantime becoming a respected actress and filmmaker. She begins to investigate her mother's life before she was born and learns that while out of town acting in a play, Diane began an affair with Canadian film producer, Harry Gulkin, who, as is later revealed, is her biological father. What ensues is a treatise on memory based around Polley's fascination with 'storytelling and the way we construct stories'<sup>169</sup> such that people will hold a particular version of an event that might differ according to what 'actually' happened and with another person's recollections. Therefore, multiplicity is built into the narrative framework of Polley's documentary. However, where is it evident in the film's structure and aesthetics?

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<sup>166</sup> See John Semley, 'From Big Snow to Big Sadness: The Repatriation of Canadian Cultural Identity in the Films of Guy Maddin', *CineAction*, Issue 73-74, Summer (2007), pp.32-37

<sup>167</sup> Semley, pp.32-37

<sup>168</sup> Semley, pp.32-7

<sup>169</sup> Sarah Polley quoted in Richard Porton, 'Family Viewing: An Interview with Sarah Polley', *Cineaste*, 38 (3), Summer 2013, pp.36-40

The pre-credits sequence to *Stories We Tell* establishes the plurality of the film's content and stylistic approach. The film opens with Michael Polley reading an excerpt from Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*: 'When you're in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all but only a confusion, a dark roaring, a blindness [...] it's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all, when you're telling it to yourself or to someone else.' This is played over images from super 8 home movies, some of which are authentic, and the others staged, which will be shown again at various points in the film's story. Leah Anderst attributes this mixing of audio and visuals from a variety of different sources to the film's 'dialogic' character which is further heightened by Polley's 'choral' approach in organising an assortment of interviewees giving 'equal weight to each piece of information and opinion, to each version of the story, and to each kind of telling' but which remains 'her own very personal and very intimate history.'<sup>170</sup> The way Sarah 'orchestrates' her 'chorus' of voices is evident at various points in *Stories We Tell*.

For example, Polley places conflicting testimonies next to each other to create a pluralised interpretation of a person. At one point Michael says he thought he was a good husband which is followed by his daughter, Joanna, saying that her Mum did all the cooking and cleaning. Later on, Sarah cuts between her interviewees when she is investigating who first mentioned that Sarah did not look like Michael with various testimonies pointing the proverbial 'finger' at a different person. Following Diane's death, Harry says that he hugged Michael at her funeral, but Michael has forgotten that Harry was even there. Of course, this narrative 'sleuthing' is necessitated by the fact that Diane, who presumably would have had the most accurate version of the story, is not alive to tell it. Critic Sarah Ward explains the role of Diane in *Stories We Tell* as a catalyst from which the multiple versions of Sarah's story emerge:

It is the careful creation of Diane as the prominent figure within the feature that forms the foundation upon which all other information finds its roots. Visually, photos and videos collected over the course of decades unleash her verve and vivacity. Aurally, the words of those left in her wake assemble layer upon layer of the complicated woman. Combined, an image emerges - but one without tangible boundaries or anchors. The film both projects its idealised version of Diane into every mention of her name, and refuses to ground itself in only one interpretation of her existence.<sup>171</sup>

In this notion of the 'idealised' representation of an individual, one finds a similarity between Polley's film and *My Winnipeg* in that both films undertake a sort of resurrection of history. In Maddin's film his family are brought together and idealised through the performance of actors,

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<sup>170</sup> Leah Anderst, 'Memory's Chorus: *Stories We Tell* and Sarah Polley's Theory of Autobiography', *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 69, December 2013, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/feature-articles/memoryschorus-stories-we-tell-and-sarah-polleys-theory-of-autobiography/> - accessed 11/09/2018

<sup>171</sup> Sarah Ward, 'Telling More than Stories', *Metro*, Issue 178, Spring 2013, pp.52-55

one of whom portrays his deceased brother. Polley also brings her mother back to life through staged scenes, albeit in a less obvious way compared to Maddin's film. Furthermore, one finds in Ward's description of friends' and relatives' as providing 'layer upon layer' of Diane's personality/identity, an echo of 'palimpsests' where each interpretation leaves an identity marker on the figure of Diane.

Polley references how the self can be plural when she comments on the process of interviewing her siblings:

At times, I genuinely remember some things differently from my siblings. There's something bizarre that I remember reading about a few years ago: when you remember an event, you're supposedly not remembering it but instead remembering your last memory of it. So if you've remembered something fifty times from when you were three years old on, it's like playing a game of broken telephone with yourself. Invariably, some little details are going to shift. It's totally understandable how stories become unintentionally distorted over time. We don't have a direct relationship with these memories.<sup>172</sup>

This description relates back to Renov's complication of the notion of a unified 'self' when explaining Lejeune's autobiographical pact. Memory is unreliable and subject to change depending on when and where the individual is remembering. Therefore, Polley's film approaches the autobiographical process through multiple perspectives and enlists a number of other voices in this memory process.

Compared to *My Winnipeg*, *Stories We Tell* is an autobiographical documentary which is seemingly more reliant on positioning the interpretations of people other than the filmmaker in the telling of the director's life story. Here, the contrast of the pronouns 'my' and 'we' in the film titles proves incisive. Therefore, whereas in *My Winnipeg*, Maddin's relatives were replaced by performances of actors, the construction of Sarah Polley's identity is performed in conjunction with 'talking head' interviews with family members, archive home movies, staged home movies with actors playing roles, and re-enactments involving the participants 'playing themselves'. Furthermore, Sarah's identity outside of the filmmaking process has changed irrevocably. She now knows her 'true' father and must 'restructure her life-narrative' accordingly.<sup>173</sup> In both films, however, this construction of identity goes hand-in-hand with its performance.

The performances in *Stories We Tell* are numerous. These include Sarah seen performing in staged scenes with Harry and Michael as well as performing the act of making the film itself when she is heard questioning interviewees off-camera, and pictured filming with a camera by another

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<sup>172</sup> Polley quoted in Porton, pp.36-40

<sup>173</sup> Laurence Raw, 'Stories We Tell' (Review), *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, Vol. 44 (1), Spring (2014): 15-17; 16-17

camera, the various interviewees, the 'real' family members in the home movie shots and the actors portraying the 'real' people in staged home movies. It is perhaps unsurprising that *Stories We Tell* displays so many layers of performance considering that the Polleys are a family of actors. Michael and Diane met when they were both performing in a play. In fact, Michael states during the film that he believes Diane fell in love with the gregarious and masculine character he was playing and could have been encouraged to begin her affair with Gulkin because he did not live up to that performance. Sarah began acting in film and television at a young age and has gone on to receive plaudits and awards for films such as *The Sweet Hereafter* (Atom Egoyan, 1997), *Go* (Doug Liman, 1999), *Dawn of the Dead* (Zack Snyder, 2004), *The Secret Life of Words* (Isabel Coixet, 2005) and *Splice* (Vincenzo Natali, 2009) as well as many others.

However, they are also a family of filmmakers. Sarah was nominated for an Academy Award for her adapted screenplay to debut film *Away from Her* (2006), which she followed up with *Take This Waltz* (2011). Her biological father, Harry, is a respected Canadian film producer whose first film, *Lies My Father Told Me* (Ján Kadár, 1975), was Oscar-nominated for 'Original Screenplay' and won the Golden Globe for 'Best Foreign Film'. And Michael is seen during *Stories We Tell* vociferously recording his and Diane's family holidays, displaying a curious cinematic 'tic' where he tilts the camera up whenever a group of people appear in the frame. Sarah pays a subtle tribute to him at the end of the documentary while she films Michael alone in his flat. And Sarah's half-brother John Buchan, who is interviewed in *Stories We Tell*, is a casting director who cast the actors to play his and Sarah's family in the staged scenes. Therefore, we can see that as well as being a family of actors, performers and filmmakers, this is a family of storytellers, which informs the formal properties of the film as well as the way a spectator will watch the film. The film's style is 'performative' because of the reflexive use of staged scenes which places the viewer in an investigative role - along with Sarah - attempting to identify what is 'real' and what is 'performed'/staged.

An example where Polley's pluralised process comes to the fore is in the sequences where she recruits the 'real' participants to re-enact a scene that has already happened. Two are central regarding the way they are filmed and how they contribute to the theme of multiple identities. The first instance is a re-enactment of the first time Sarah and Harry meet in a local café. Sarah has travelled to Montreal to interview Harry in an attempt to find out what he knew of Diane's affair. During their conversation, which lasts for hours, the pair discover that they like similar things and have similar political allegiances. This confirms Harry's suspicions that he is her biological father. Later, in a key scene from Sarah's life story, Sarah and Michael re-enact the moment when she tells him that he is not her father. The scene begins with Michael acting out theatrical traditions of drunkenness before noticing that Sarah's mind is elsewhere. After she

reveals her true parentage, Michael explains that, for him at least, nothing has changed, and they are still father and daughter in his mind.

Both scenes feature performance in reflexive ways. The film stock imitates super 8 home movies, which therefore blends with the other 'home movie' footage we see throughout the film. They are silent, we do not hear diegetic speech from the scene itself, but both are narrated by their participants taken from the interviews Sarah is conducting with them while they reflect on these moments. As a result, Michael, Harry and Sarah are each 'playing themselves' in these sequences. At some points, the speech by Michael and Sarah is made to sync with their re-enacted 'other's' miming of the same line. These scenes become a 'partial "simulacrum,"' and once again 'attest to Polley's theory of a choral, plural autobiography where she involves her participants in the creation of her visual stories, but, because she is still the film's director, they also make evident her own control.'<sup>174</sup>

Sarah Polley's status as the main organising presence in *Stories We Tell* may be a given, despite the numerous spoken testimonies she includes in the film. However, in *This is Not a Film*, the role of director, actor and writer are in constant flux and, at points, jeopardy. A co-'effort', as the end credits explain, by renowned Iranian film director Jafar Panahi and his friend, documentary filmmaker Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, here autobiography becomes an act of political defiance. The film was made at a time when Panahi – whose earlier fictional projects have been critical of a repressive Iranian government – has been banned from making films. In July 2009, his support in the Iranian elections for the reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi led to Panahi's arrest. Subsequently, in March 2010, he was arrested again and imprisoned until May that year, 'this time charged over a documentary he was going to make (but never made) about the unrest that followed the disputed 2009 re-election of [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad.'<sup>175</sup> In December 2010, Panahi was found guilty of participating in a 'gathering' and for producing propaganda against the government and was 'sentenced to six years imprisonment, with a twenty-year ban on directing and producing films, talking to the media and leaving Iran.'<sup>176</sup> *This is Not a Film* depicts Panahi under house arrest and awaiting the outcome of his appeal.

In contrast to *My Winnipeg* and *Stories We Tell*, *This is Not a Film* is less concerned with the origins of the autobiographer. Instead it follows 'a day in the life' of Panahi who is filmed by Mirtahmasb attempting to visualise and 'map out' his aborted last screenplay which, according to the director, does not break the rules of his sentence. As such, the film becomes a comment on

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<sup>174</sup> Anderst, p.29

<sup>175</sup> Alice Burgin, 'Panahi vs. The State: *This is Not a Film*', *Metro: Media & Education Magazine*, 171 (2011), pp.46-49

<sup>176</sup> Burgin, pp.46-49

the nature of filmmaking itself; what constitutes a film? What is a filmmaker if their profession is taken away from them? The crux of the film is captured by Panahi's own question as he pauses in the middle of acting out a scene from the screenplay. Slightly teary-eyed he says, "If we could tell a film, why make a film?"

What becomes clear as the film plays out is that this is a protest against a repressive regime that increasingly flouts the terms of Panahi's sentence. The central tension throughout is the role Panahi is able to play in the construction of the film and his identity which is under judiciary threat. In an article for *Film Quarterly*, Rob White questions whether the film's spectator is 'watching Panahi the documentary subject or a character named Jafar?'<sup>177</sup> The former role is evident when Panahi is filmed and interviewed by Mirtahmasb. The director continually voices his displeasure at being on the other side of the camera. We can extend the latter category of Panahi the 'character' to include the moments in which he is seen acting out his screenplay. The script concerns a young woman who wants to go to Art College but, on hearing of her acceptance to the school, her conservative parents lock her inside the house (an eerie resemblance to Panahi's own situation). He performs her actions as he reads from the script, lying on an imaginary bed and gazing out of an invisible window as well as reading her lines of dialogue while commenting on the nuances of tone in the delivery. To these we can add a number of other identities Panahi adopts throughout the course of the film.

First, there is Panahi the filmmaker. Despite his protests, Panahi clearly takes ownership of the film's production both in early shots where he sets up the camera on a tripod to film himself eating breakfast, phone Mirtahmasb, etc. and at the end of the film when, in a moment reflected in *Stories We Tell*, the film cuts between Panahi and Mirtahmasb filming each other before he travels outside of the apartment block. We also see Panahi directing in behind the scenes footage of *The Mirror* (1997). Secondly, and related to Panahi the filmmaker, is his role as the lecturer. In between takes from his documentary procedure of planning the screenplay, Panahi screens segments from some of his previous films on DVD in his living room. Topics up for discussion include exterior locations mirroring the internal psyche of characters in *The Circle* (2000) and his inability to coach acting by amateurs in *Crimson Gold* (2003). Finally, Panahi-as-prisoner is present in every frame but is most noticeable when he gazes out over his balcony at the outside world just beyond reach. Similarly to Maddin and Polley, Panahi is balancing a variety of different roles throughout the film.

I have demonstrated that the autobiographers of these three films occupy and represent multiple 'selves' to the film spectator and that the very structure and formal strategies found within them

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<sup>177</sup> Rob White, 'Institutionalized', *Film Quarterly*, 65.3 (Spring 2012), pp.4-6

are determined by this plurality of identity. But what does this mean for the film spectator?

Robert Ezra Park explains how the origins of the words 'person', 'persona', 'personality', etc. connect to how individuals conduct themselves in everyday social interactions:

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role [...] It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves [...] In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons.<sup>178</sup>

As such, for a spectator watching these films, the range of 'selves' offered by the filmmaker/autobiographer should not only be understood as logical because of the fact that we are all of us 'performing' in one way or another, but also necessary because 'it is in these roles that we know ourselves' which, for the determined autobiographer, is often the *modus operandi* of the filmed undertaking. However, the opposite can also be true, where the filmmaker/autobiographer seeks to intentionally complicate or muddy the representational waters by using these various roles. Erving Goffman demonstrates this by contrasting his definition of 'biography' with the presentation of the individual in society. He begins by identifying that we assume a person can only have one biography which contains 'everything an individual has done and can actually do'.<sup>179</sup> This, for Goffman, is *a priori* true regardless of how false, incoherent or manipulative the individual's life is. However, Goffman notes that this definition of biography 'is in sharp contrast to the multiplicity of selves one finds in the individual in looking at him from the perspective of social role, where, if role and audience segregation are well-managed, he can quite handily sustain different selves and can to a degree claim to be no longer something he was.'<sup>180</sup>

This strategy is perhaps most evident in the mythopoeic construction of Maddin's *My Winnipeg*. One feels that, through implementing a heterogeneous visual style and composite definitions of his relatives, his film is deliberately scattershot and seeks to destabilise a spectator's impression of him. Described as a blending of the fiction films of David Lynch and Michael Moore's documentaries and generically fluid in the way it 'veers from a straightforward narrative, to a bizarre travelogue, to a broad satire and a haunting visual poem, never quite settling into any of

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<sup>178</sup> Robert Ezra Park, *Race and Culture* (Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1950), page 249-50

<sup>179</sup> Erving Goffman, 'Information Control and Personal Identity' in *Stigma: Notes of the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1968), p.81

<sup>180</sup> Goffman, p.81

these', *My Winnipeg* aims to confound at many different levels.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, part of this effect can be attributed to Maddin's approach to his autobiography as 'docu-fantasia' which connotes a blurring of internal and external spaces and how the imagination of the autobiographical director can come to inform the telling of their life narrative.

## 2.2 Internal/External, Private/Public Spaces

Autobiographical films are inherently subjective because they are made by the subject about the subject. Furthermore, they are often instigated by a look 'inside' a person, be that their personality (which as we have seen is usually represented as being multifaceted) or thoughts, dreams, desires, which are then externalised in the making of the documentary. These films rely on 'the documentary impulse to objectively record a historical world "out there" and on the autobiographical impulse to subjectively record a private world "in here"'.<sup>182</sup>

*My Winnipeg* is arguably the most subjective of the three films under discussion here in the way it merges documentary subject with expressive visual style. Maddin's description of his film as a 'docu-fantasia' is telling: 'I firmly believe that the film is a documentary, but in a pre-emptive strike against tiresome arguments I just call it a 'docu-fantasia' and that seems to at least limn out a sub-genre of documentary for itself.'<sup>183</sup> The director continues by saying that the 'facts' are 'presented dreamily' and he describes the autobiographical process as like going 'on a little Möbius strip train trip through my home town'.<sup>184</sup> The subjectivity of Maddin's endeavour is here defined by the Möbius strip being a one-sided shape. The 'dreamy' aesthetic to which Maddin refers is achieved primarily through the director's choice to use film stock and visual nods to the late silent film period. The term 'docu-fantasia' thus blurs the external recording of the world 'out there' – with archive footage of Winnipeg mixing with some use of contemporary colour sequences – and the fantastical depiction of Maddin's internal world 'in here'.

The film's external world, that of Winnipeg and the odd moments of its history, is significant in how it informs the subject's internal self for critic Ryan Gilbey. He states that '*My Winnipeg* nudges at the heart of what it means to dream, and how our fantasies of who we are spring from

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<sup>181</sup> Jason Horsley, 'Obsessions into Light: an interview with Guy Maddin', *Cineaste*, Vol.XXXIII, Issue 4, Fall 2008, pp.47-49

<sup>182</sup> Lane, p.4

<sup>183</sup> Maddin quoted in interview with Michael Brooke, 'Home on the Range', *Sight & Sound*, Vol.XVIII, Issue 7, July 2008, p.12

<sup>184</sup> Maddin quoted in Michael Brooke, p.12

the reality of where we are'.<sup>185</sup> Maddin's Winnipeg, which is populated by sleepwalkers who listlessly wander the city's secret alleyways, is thus interpreted as the cause as to why the director is unable to escape. And the sleepwalking/dreaming theme is reflected in the fragmented narrative structure and editing of the film as a whole; 'not following a linear trajectory, certain details are cut out while others are amplified, springing back into consciousness when one least expects.'<sup>186</sup>

Certainly, more so to the uninitiated, Maddin's film is at times difficult to keep up with, as David Church summarises:

The movies of Guy Maddin are an uncanny amalgamation of personal obsessions and private memories made public. Maddin's fears and desires sparkle forth amid melodramatic tropes so winkingly heightened and bizarre that every new convulsion begs for laughter. Lovingly digesting the visual tropes of archaic cinema, he infuses his fervid narratives with a gaze into the dusty corners of the medium's bygone years, drawing upon an encyclopaedic (and largely self-taught) knowledge of classic film.<sup>187</sup>

These internal/private thoughts made external/public manifest themselves throughout the film. A repeated refrain is "the Forks beneath the Forks" with reference to the Forks River which runs through Winnipeg and is rumoured to have a set of subterranean channels beneath the surface. Maddin includes a geographical map of the river – a traditional technique of expositional documentary – but subsequently transforms the water source into the source of Winnipeg's inhabitants by superimposing a zoom shot of female genitalia onto the image. His voiceover euphemistically refers to the 'lap' of the Forks which contributes to Maddin's formulation of his hometown 'as a kind of narcotic-secreting teat, a place which releases such a flood of melatonin in its residents that they drift like sleepwalkers along streets that in turn drift with snow.'<sup>188</sup>

Furthermore, at the end of the film, Maddin invents a superhero named Citizen Girl (played by Kate Yacula) who would set right all of the injustices done to Winnipeg. This demonstrates a wish fulfilment and use of autobiography as a canvas on which to project Maddin's alternative history of Winnipeg.

Maddin's films also reveal a fascination with resurrecting people who are deceased, thus adding a further significance to his archaic visual style. Church explains:

<sup>185</sup> Ryan Gilbey, 'My Winnipeg' (Review), *Sight & Sound*, Vol.XVIII, Issue 7, July 2008, pp.66-67

<sup>186</sup> David Church, 'Bark Fish Appreciation: An Introduction' in *Playing with Memories: Essays on Guy Maddin* (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2009), p.8

<sup>187</sup> Church, p.2

<sup>188</sup> Geoff Prevere, 'Foreword' in David Church (ed.), *Playing with Memories: Essays on Guy Maddin* (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2009), p.xiii

For Maddin, tropes from old movies become mnemonics for not only the cultural past, but ghosts from his personal past. He seems forever placing both past and present objects of desire (e.g. lost romantic loves, deceased family members) at a faux-historical distance, relegating them to the dustbin of history as unnaturally old and impossibly unattainable. When he frequently resurrects the dead in his films, it is, in his own words, “a quick shorthand for the desire to see someone again who has been removed from me, or from a character, through death or rejection.”<sup>189</sup>

In *My Winnipeg*, through the autobiographical approach of re-enacting moments from his childhood, Maddin revives his elder brother, the family dog (which is actually his girlfriend’s in the film), and his father who is disinterred beneath the living room carpet. Other ‘ghosts’ populate the film. There is an episode which reconstructs a pagan ritual-séance which was supposed to have taken place at Winnipeg’s city hall, and Maddin creates an all-star hockey team of deceased famous players, called ‘The Black Tuesdays’, to play as his favourite stadium is being torn down. Consequently, Maddin uses his autobiographical film to ‘preserve such personal ghosts, trapping them on seemingly pre-decayed celluloid, lingering just barely above the forgetful abyss of history’ as a way of playing out fantasies of missed opportunities or to right historical wrongs.<sup>190</sup>

Indeed, it is pertinent that Maddin describes his filming and editing technique as a form of therapy to confront psychological issues. The English ‘trauma’ comes from the Greek for ‘wound’. However, the German “*traum*” translates to “dream” in English thus providing a linguistic link to the director’s oneiric filming style:

Every time I film something, it ends up as units of the physical movie that need to be worked and reworked - massaged into place, given sound effects, cut, mixed, colour timed, premiered, talked about - until from aversion therapy you just end up so tired of it. I really thought that by making *My Winnipeg*, I would cure myself of Winnipeg and be free to leave. But through this aversion therapy, what you find out is what the subject of your obsession really is. And for me it wasn't Winnipeg, it was whether I should stay or go. And that's what I've cured myself of. I don't care if I stay or go. I realize I'm lucky to live there among the friends and muses I have, but I'm also free to travel as much as I want and go other places. And I can do both, or neither.<sup>191</sup>

Thus, Maddin gives the impression that through making *My Winnipeg*, his process has produced a positive psychological effect. His use of the phrase ‘worked and reworked’ carry connotations with psychoanalysis where dream or memory material must be examined and ‘dealt with’ so as to live a mentally healthy life. Granted, Maddin might also be referring to his editing process and where sections of material shot should be placed within the film as a whole, in which case we

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<sup>189</sup> Church, p.6

<sup>190</sup> Church, p.8

<sup>191</sup> Maddin quoted in Semley, pp.66-72

could say that the phrase is a 'Freudian slip' that reveals a psychoanalytic or confessional as well as a filmic process.

This purpose of autobiography is certainly not anything new. As previously mentioned, the autobiographical impulse to reveal private thoughts and feelings as a healing agent dates at least as far back as St. Augustine's *Confessions* from the late fourth century.<sup>192</sup> By documenting internal traumas in writing, the confessional autobiographer could initiate a means 'to escape madness, to reveal secret, hidden places, and to face the world with a new and 'easeful' liberty.'<sup>193</sup> In Augustine's case, according to Peter Dennis Bathory, he uses the psychological anxieties he had in a positive way as part of his 'therapeutic method', in which 'anxiety took on a creative potential in that it could – if properly perceived – challenge people and lead not to paralysis but to an active search for self-realization'.<sup>194</sup>

Augustine was confessing to his Christian God, so how can the confessional discourse relate to Guy Maddin the filmmaker, or any other documentarian undertaking such an enterprise? As Michel Foucault elaborates, confession is '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.'<sup>195</sup> For the autobiographical documentary, the figure of authority who receives the director's confession could arguably be the film spectator. The proscenium arch of the film screen and the critical and spatial distance caused by the cinematic apparatus mirrors two other social arenas of confession; church and therapist's office. However, for *My Winnipeg*, the 'virtual presence' to whom Maddin the filmmaker confesses could be the character 'Guy Maddin' who restlessly sleeps/dreams on the imaginary train carriage. It is he who occupies the embodiment of the film's narrative set-up, namely, whether 'he' should stay or leave Winnipeg. The desired result, to which the previous quote from Maddin seems to attest, is that the confession, 'independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.'<sup>196</sup>

Renov contemplates confession in an updated context by acknowledging that forms of video enact a performative impulse akin to mental healing:

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<sup>192</sup> Renov, 'Video Confessions', p.193

<sup>193</sup> Peter Dennis Bathory, *Political Theory as Public Confession: The Social and Political Thought of St. Augustine of Hippo* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1981), p.21

<sup>194</sup> Bathory, p.38

<sup>195</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), pp.61-62 cited in Renov, p.192

<sup>196</sup> Foucault, pp.61-62 cited in Renov, p.192

Functioning at the join of public and private domains, confession as public discourse (confessional literature or performative display) can be understood either as a kind of self-interrogation that produces spiritual reconciliation while implicitly challenging others to ethical action (a theological reading) or as an acting-out of repressed material that, when subjected to analysis, can facilitate the transfer of unconscious psychic material to the preconscious (a psychoanalytic reading) – therapeutic ends, both of them. And, of course, therapy has emerged as one of the growth industries of our age. Given an understanding of the multiform historical role that confession has played in the development of Western thought, how can we now begin to talk about the transformations of confessional culture in the late twentieth century? And what place should we give to video in this account?<sup>197</sup>

Of course, in a twenty-first century society, digital technologies have superseded video. The internet, with its social networking sites where users are able to keep online digital diaries and video-sharing platforms that exhibit autobiographical shorts to an enormous audience, has expanded the confessional documentary impulse in an instantaneous flow of identity information. But while this technological innovation might have turned us into vicarious confessants, it also provides access to a wide range of texts which might encourage us to contemplate on a variety of different themes and issues. *Stories We Tell* is one such text which uses the internal/external dialectic as a means through which the spectator can consider the stories we recount about our own families.

If the autobiographical confessional act has existed since Augustine's writing in the fourth century then, '[a]t least since the Greeks, art has been judged capable of yielding "cathartic" effects for artist and audience alike through the public disclosure of concealed impulses and secret wishes, secondarily revised.'<sup>198</sup> For Sarah Polley, this 'cleansing' through art was a process which revealed a hidden heritage masked by multiple narratives and internalised memories and thoughts. And it was an exercise which she hoped would prompt the film's audience to consider what was 'real' or not in her documentary and their own family lives.<sup>199</sup> Central to this process is the act of storytelling which is a process that includes internal/external and private/public spaces. As has been previously demonstrated, *Stories We Tell* is inextricably linked to storytelling (interviewees, Sarah filming, acting heritage, etc.). This is the internal made external, filtered through either the physical body (mouth) or an exterior surrogate apparatus (pen, camera). However, the documentary 'works', according to this dialectic, in other ways at the narrative and aesthetic level.

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<sup>197</sup> Renov, p.194

<sup>198</sup> Renov, p.195

<sup>199</sup> Polley quoted in Porton, pp.36-40

Firstly, the story content of *Stories We Tell*, the fact that Sarah learns of her paternal origins, is a source of tension centred around the desire to be true about oneself and the pain the revelation of this story could cause to those involved. Polley did not tell Michael of her discovery until nearly a year after finding out and, as is detailed in the film, she sought to retain ownership of the story for a further five years by trying to convince journalists not to reveal it in the press.<sup>200</sup> Sarah's wish to manage who knows about her family secret becomes the source of a certain degree of strain between her and Harry Gulkin, the biological father, who believes that it is he who holds the most reliable information.

Harry plans to write a memoir and subsequently publish it. In the film, we hear a sequence of fraught email exchanges between Gulkin and Sarah where she explains that the story needs to be told as a combination of all those involved. Harry says that this would muddy the 'truth', and that the inclusion of the main 'players' (Harry, Diane) and then their relatives, close friends and acquaintances would be like a web opening out and becoming larger until the 'truth' becomes distorted and elusive. It is implied in the film that Harry's plan to publish his version of the story prompts Sarah to begin her documentary project which includes this very complex 'web' when the above exchange cuts to shots of Sarah preparing to film.

The aesthetic choice to include staged home movies presented to, if not 'fool' the spectator then, appear consistent with the rest of the film's style, is significant when speaking about the internal/external dichotomy. To begin with, some of these 'mock-home movies' are conspicuous regarding either their difficulty to have been filmed (Diane's funeral for instance), or implausibility that a camera would be present to record (such as the sequences at a bar in Montreal when Harry and Diane meet for the first time). Therefore, through some interviewee testimony but predominantly her own imagination, Sarah creates these scenes. Indeed, Sarah would not have been alive for some of them. Memory of her childhood home living with Michael and Diane could have influenced her décor design and she cast actors who bear a striking resemblance to their real-life counterparts. The impression that these movies are authentic and indistinguishable from the other archive home-movie footage Polley intersperses into the film is enhanced by the faux super 8 film stock treatment of the images. Furthermore, the soundtrack contributes to this *mise-en-abyme* structure which plays excerpts from *Play Me a Movie*, a 1971 recording for the Smithsonian by Abraham Lass based on his experience as a neighbourhood movie pianist in the 1920s.<sup>201</sup> The tinkling piano melodies that accompany the silent home-movie

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<sup>200</sup> Brian D. Johnson, 'This Documentary Needs a Spoiler Alert' (Review), *Maclean's*, 10/15/2012, Vol. 125, Issue 40, p71

<sup>201</sup> Sophie Mayer, 'Stories We Tell' (Review), *Sight & Sound*, Vol. 23, Issue 7, July 2013, p.87<sup>20</sup>

footage in *Stories We Tell* aurally transports the spectator back to early film and creates the impression that we are watching a 'phantom paradigmatic film from our memories'.<sup>202</sup>

I recently screened *Stories We Tell* for a second-year documentary film module at the University of Southampton. In a number of cases, it was only when we came to discuss the film in seminars that some students discovered some of this footage had been 'faked'. Polley has, herself, expressed surprise at just how many spectators of the film have been taken in by these scenes:

Some people don't find out until the credits, some people find out when we finally go behind the scenes, some people find out before that...What's weird is that I didn't think that people would be fooled for very long; I thought they'd figure it out quickly, if not necessarily from the beginning. I've been quite amazed by people's ability to suspend disbelief. When people have said they didn't find out until the credits, I've replied, "Well, what about the re-creation that shows me directing it?" People's desire to believe what they're seeing is so strong. It's so strange! And who would be filming at the funeral?<sup>203</sup>

The subsequent revelation that large sections of *Stories We Tell* have been created from the director's imagination has a direct impact on how the spectator watches the rest of the film, considers what they have viewed before the realisation, or how they will analyse the film upon a second viewing. According to art historian Ellen Handler Spitz, 'artistic creativity consists in structuring the bewildering chaos of external stimuli, then we must acknowledge that it draws on and likewise reveals the ordering of inner turbulence, of fantasy, and dream.'<sup>204</sup> Psychoanalytic theorist Fred Busch, commenting on Polley's films, elaborates on Handler Spitz's comments when he writes that 'what is of particular interest to us as psychoanalysts is how successful the creative process is in representing personal experience so that the representations are of interest [to] or affect a wider audience'.<sup>205</sup> Therefore, Polley's playful negotiation of 'real' and staged archive footage can be read as an attempt to engage with her audience as much as her own memories and identity construction so that they might consider their own family history. Journalist Johann Hari expounds on this point:

Polley is showing us scenes that can never be found again, that are lost forever, that she wants to see and can't [...] The technique slaps us, the viewers, into exactly the emotional state that Polley finds herself in. She is flicking through her own memory, reassessing everything she has seen, just as we are. The narrative style makes it possible for us to understand what it is to be inside her head, in a way we couldn't if we coldly stood outside it, adhering to the rules of *cinéma vérité*. The

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<sup>202</sup> Mayer, p.87

<sup>203</sup> Polley quoted in Porton, pp.36-40

<sup>204</sup> Ellen Handler Spitz (1988 ; p.112) quoted in Fred Busch, 'Working through Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (and the issue of creative expression)', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol 96(2), April 2015, pp.477-491

<sup>205</sup> Busch, pp.477-491

narrative style forces us to think about our own family stories – the core of our identities – in a different way. All of our childhood memories are, to some extent, conflations and confabulations. Polley has found a way to dramatise this universal truth.<sup>206</sup>

Polley's film shares a certain idealisation with Maddin's *My Winnipeg* at wanting to preserve, review, or in some cases, watch for the first time, historical childhood moments by using the autobiographical documentary framework as the catalyst to remember and memorialise so as to better understand their identity in the present. However, whereas Polley and Maddin's films utilise reflexive aesthetic strategies to foster a feeling that we are watching their internal selves externalised into their documentary films, *This is Not a Film* does this with much greater emphasis placed on the physical/geographical contrast between spaces with its filmmaker and documentary subject under house arrest.

This 'non-film' opens with Panahi, framed at the kitchen table eating breakfast. He phones his friend, and the credited co-director of the film, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, to ask him to come over to the apartment to help him with the project. Accompanying the scene is the sound of explosions, which one could construe as missiles or bombs but are in fact fireworks celebrating New Year in Iran. This, on the one hand, is an apt auditory symbol which represents the optimism of a fresh start in the year to come. But it is also a metaphor for political unrest – the reason Panahi is confined to his apartment. Moreover, it is a constant accompaniment to the film. Panahi and Mirtahmasb pause filming when the former is reading his favourite piece of dialogue from the abandoned film project he is mapping out in the living room because of the exterior bangs. Panahi puts down the script, picks up his smartphone, and opens a window and films. Moments such as these in the film come to symbolise that the external world has been denied Panahi just as he has been banned from filmmaking; a practice which is largely dependent on the internal imagination.

Following on from Handler Spitz's comments on the necessity of external stimuli to be able to create art, incarceration therefore obstructs the construction and playing out of internal ideas and thoughts which are essential in this example of autobiography for Panahi to be able to successfully negotiate his sense of self. It is unsurprising, then, that *This is Not a Film* displays numerous examples and intertextual references to internal/external and private/public boundaries.

Clearly, as a matter of legal concern, the majority of the film takes place in confined spaces: Panahi's apartment is expensive-looking, but smaller spaces exist within it and the block; the camera frame condenses the space as does Panahi when he marks out the specifications of the

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<sup>206</sup> Johann Hari, 'Reality Hunger', *New Statesman*, 13/2/2015, pp.44-47

house from his screenplay; and later, Panahi travels down through the apartment building in a cramped lift while filming the block's refuse collector. Furthermore, the subject of the script Panahi reads and re-enacts concerns a girl who is locked in her room when her parents find out that she plans to go to art school (another link is made here to the rubbish collector who says that he is studying fine art at college). This mirrors Panahi's own current situation. Also significant is the role played by the director's pet iguana, Igi. He is pictured climbing up bookcases, reluctantly feeding on lettuce and crawling over Panahi while on his computer. Igi has been turned into a 'nonchalant domestic dragon' and serves as a persistent visual symbol of Panahi's imprisonment.<sup>207</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Panahi had become a publicly outspoken detractor of Ahmadinejad's government whose films typically ventured onto the streets and contained thinly veiled critiques of contemporary Iranian society. Locked up, the director is no longer supposed to be able to employ this tactic. However, Panahi succeeds at including political protest at the end of *This is Not a Film* when, in a flagrant flouting of the terms of his incarceration, he follows the rubbish collector out of the apartment block building and films a bonfire taking place on the street outside. This is a fitting final image which captures Panahi's feeling of disquiet about the direction towards which his country is heading.

Not content with having made the film and breaking the terms of his sentence, Panahi and his team managed to smuggle it out of the country on a USB stick supposedly hidden within a cake where it played at the Cannes Film Festival, and 'made its way through festivals on four different continents, and [...] obtained international theatrical distribution in the US, Europe and Australia'.<sup>208</sup> The negotiation between internal and external spaces is again circumvented in Panahi's *Taxi Tehran* (2015), a mixing of documentary and fiction, which sees the filmmaker playing a cab driver who picks up an assortment of travellers (played by actors) around the eponymous city. The cameras, which are mounted along the car's dashboard, never leave the inside of the vehicle. If we refer back to one of Panahi's 'lectures' from *This is Not a Film*, in which he explains that external settings (citing *The Circle*) can mirror characters' internal thoughts and fears, we can postulate that with this external stimulus removed the internal environment and the film itself starts to reflect Panahi's own private feelings with the claustrophobic interiors acting as a subtle, but enraged, critique of the governing society that has put him in this position.

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<sup>207</sup> Rob White, 'Institutionalized', *Film Quarterly* 65.3 (Spring 2012), pp.4-6

<sup>208</sup> Alice Burgin, 'Panahi vs. The State: *This is Not a Film*', *Metro: Media & Education Magazine*, 171 (2011), pp.46-49

In the Introductory chapter to this project, I summarised literary scholar Elizabeth Bruss's critique of autobiography in film. Her position can be simply reduced to her relating filmed autobiography to Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact':

The unity of subjectivity and subject matter – the implied identity of author, narrator, and protagonist on which classical autobiography depends – seems to be shattered by film; the autobiographical self decomposes, 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).<sup>209</sup>

Bruss's comments highlight her assumption that autobiographical film results in a multiplicity of positions which the filmmaker can occupy. This is precisely the point. As I have shown, the notion of a singular, stable self is problematised by these films: Guy Maddin casts an actor to play him while he narrates and constructs memories from his childhood; Jafar Panahi negotiates his roles as director, scriptwriter, actor, lecturer and political activist; and Sarah Polley orchestrates representations of her own identity reconstructing the discovery of her origins at the same time as conversing with family members and close friends. Identity in these films is in a constant state of flux, reacting to revelations in the film's narrative or external forces.

Consequently, Bruss's position means that film autobiography has no clear 'self' as its creator or subject. Edwards, Hubbell and Miller quote Wendy Everett's counter to Bruss's claim:

[O]n the contrary, [Everett] claims that "film constitutes a privileged medium for the expression of autobiographical memory", often motivated by the desire to explore personal and national guilt. It has the capacity for the reconstruction of past worlds reimagined and realized not in accordance with historical veracity but with memory, often interwoven with fantasy. The apparent surface realism is in fact a personal vision, a "memory realism," in which objects and settings serve as triggers in a process of self-discovery and re-evaluation of the past.<sup>210</sup>

'Personal vision' and 'memory realism' are recurrent themes across all three films. The reconstruction of a childhood past or the creation of fantasy, idealised worlds is especially prevalent in *My Winnipeg* and *Stories We Tell*. Nevertheless, in each case the subjectivity of the filmmaker is apparent through their own reflexive representational choices. As I have noted,

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<sup>209</sup> Elizabeth Bruss, 'Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film in James Olney (ed.) *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, c1980), p.297

<sup>210</sup> Edwards, Hubbell, Miller, eds., 'Introduction: Textual and Visual Selves' in *Textual & Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography* (Lincoln, NE, USA: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), p.14

these include devices such as reconstruction, actors playing 'real' people and specific cinematographic effects (black and white silent film aesthetic, home-movies) and are framed within the filmmakers' search for or definition of their identity. The performative qualities they produce, the self-awareness of the filmmaking process, invite the film spectator to consider themes from the documentary and relate them to their own lives.

In the next chapter, I shift the focus from documentaries made by and about the same person (autobiography), to examples of nonfiction where this is impossible due to the fact that both subjects are no longer alive. Two films by British-Iranian director Asif Kapadia – *Senna* (2010) and *Amy* (2015) – will act as case-studies. I will question how their biographical subject's respective sporting and musical performances contribute to the construction of their identity, with a particular focus on the representation of the 'performing body'.



## Chapter 3 Performance in Sports and Music Documentaries

In the previous chapter we saw how in autobiographical documentary the filmmakers implemented reflexive formal strategies to perform the process of memory in order to formulate their respective identities. This chapter will analyse how performance features in sports and music documentaries, which, at first glance, appear to be very different 'types' of nonfiction film. However, they have in common a propensity to visualise the bodies of individuals engaged in performance acts. Consequently, the aim of the rest of this chapter is to investigate these 'performing bodies', how the body can be understood as a performative space and used by an individual or society to construct and commodify their identity. I will trace this through two performing bodies – in *Senna* (2010), Brazilian F1 racing driver Ayrton Senna and in *Amy* (2015), British singer/songwriter Amy Winehouse – in the documentary films of British-Iranian filmmaker, Asif Kapadia. I will consider how each subject can be said to 'perform' quantitatively or qualitatively, how their mediated bodies are displayed, often with an emphasis placed on pain as a process through which identities are defined. Finally, the significance of the 'voice' in constructing the 'self' will be assessed through close textual analysis of Kapadia's documentary technique.

The phrase 'performing bodies' is deliberately ambivalent. On the one hand, 'performing bodies' means bodies who/which perform. In relation to this chapter, bodies are seen performing driving a racing car and singing onstage; these are bodies that 'do something'. On the other hand, 'performing bodies' also defines the process where performance constitutes the body, brings it into existence; 'doing' bodies. In this way, we can understand these bodies as 'performative' because in this 'doing', the body is defined, known, and understood. Related to this is Helmuth Plessner's dichotomy between 'being' a body and 'having' a body.<sup>211</sup> In other words, the body as subject versus the body as object.

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<sup>211</sup> Markus Hallensleben (ed.), citing Helmuth Plessner, 'Introduction: Performative Body Spaces' in *Performative Body Spaces: Corporeal Topographies in Literature, Theatre, Dance, and the Visual Arts* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2010)

### 3.1 Different Types of Performance

Before analysing the implications Senna and Winehouse's performing bodies have for defining their identities, we need to address what different types of performance are apparent in the two films. Here I use the terms 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' performance.

Quantitative and qualitative research methods are popular within natural and social science disciplines and have been defined as processes of statistical inquiry, the former analysing numbers, and the latter words.<sup>212</sup> These research methods are a form of empirical research that use data to conceptualise the social reality being studied.<sup>213</sup> This explanation is perhaps too simplistic and some critics have taken issue with the numeral/verbal distinction.<sup>214</sup> However, related to performance, the terms provide a useful starting point. 'Quantitative Performance' is perhaps most easily applied to *Senna*. Evaluated within a sporting context where data is collated and compared in order to determine who wins and who loses, Senna's lap times, his speed, represent this type of performance. The success or failure of a person is measured in minutes and seconds. On the other hand, in *Amy*, onstage singing performances are assessed according to their 'quality', their ability to create an affect – hence, they are 'qualitative performances'. In social sciences this typically involves 'within-case' analysis, thereby focusing on the causal logic on an individual event/subject and making inferences based on available data.<sup>215</sup>

Of course, there are overlaps. Many interviewees in *Senna* marvel at his driving skill, especially in adverse weather conditions. And, arguably, Winehouse's success can be calculated according to record sales, downloads, awards, number one singles or albums, etc. Additionally, as a result of Kapadia's formal strategy of relying on archive footage and home videos, we can observe Senna and Winehouse 'being themselves' (albeit mediated by the film camera) away from where they perform. However, the main emphasis of each subject's performance rests on this 'quantitative'/'qualitative' distinction and it is interesting to note how these definitions can relate to historical theorisations of 'documentary' as a form; as a conflict between authentic, objective representation of reality versus an affecting, subjective one. Indeed, as I will demonstrate, Kapadia's films promote a mixed methods approach by combining quantitative and qualitative information with which the spectator is able to engage and question in order to reveal the 'real'

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<sup>212</sup> Gary King, Robert O. Keohane & Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton University Press, 1994), p.4

<sup>213</sup> Keith Punch, 'Introduction' in *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches* Third Edition (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014), pp2-3

<sup>214</sup> Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, 'Introduction' in *A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), p.2

<sup>215</sup> Goertz and Mahoney, p.9

Ayrton Senna or Amy Winehouse. In this case, do the number of driver's championships Senna won or the charming and intense intellectual persona he cultivates/is cultivated by the media show what he is 'really' like? Or do the number of record sales or Grammy award wins add up to Winehouse's true self when compared with the extensive reporting of her drug and alcohol addictions and the toll it took on her body and voice? The answer, unsurprisingly, is not as simple as this or that feature. Instead, the documentaries' accounts of significant events in these two lives, taken together, show an interpretation and one which attracted controversy when the films were released.

The criticisms are linked to claims of authenticity, which, as we have already seen, have been instrumental to documentary's development as a film form. First of all, documentary films already create an assumption that what a spectator is about to see is the 'truth', no matter the subjective treatment of this truth. Secondly, Kapadia's documentary technique of using familiar and never-before-seen footage, as well as extensive interviews with key figures, creates an aura of authenticity to each film (as does the film's one-word, all-encompassing titles). Finally, and extraneous to the documentaries themselves, is the complex formulation of what constitutes the authentic individual. For example, Alain Prost, the teammate and rival of Ayrton Senna, was unhappy that the finished documentary did not devote significant attention to the drivers' reconciliation later on in their careers.<sup>216</sup> The filmmakers would argue that there is only so much that can be included in a feature-length film, and instances such as this further highlight the editorial bias involved in making non-fiction films.

Amy received more sustained backlash, possibly because it centred on family members and was linked to details that contributed to her premature death. When the Winehouse family, who had endorsed the project, first saw the film at a special screening they claimed that it "is both misleading and contains some basic untruths".<sup>217</sup> The most outspoken opponent of the film was Mitch Winehouse, Amy's father. Once again, his main grievance about the final film is to do with editing. He claims that the film distorts his statement regarding whether Amy should go to rehab (which would later become a famous lyric in the song, 'Rehab') by omitting the phrase "at that time" as he was commenting on one of the first occasions that he became aware that his

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<sup>216</sup> Paul Gittings, 'F1 great Prost's regret over Senna film', *CNN.com*, <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/12/03/sport/motorsport/motorsport-prost-senna-filmregret/index.html>, accessed 17/05/18

<sup>217</sup> Emine Saner, 'Interview: Mitch Winehouse on Amy the film: "I told them they were a disgrace. I said: You should be ashamed of yourselves"', *The Guardian*, 01/05/2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/may/01/mitch-winehouse-interview-amydocumentary-film> accessed 16/05/18

daughter was taking drugs.<sup>218</sup> He also objected to other parts of the documentary, which suggest that Mitch attempted to ‘cash in’ on Amy’s addiction and the media furore surrounding her. In a statement to *The Guardian* newspaper, the filmmakers defend the editorial decisions, writing that, “The story that the film tells is a reflection of our findings from these interviews.”<sup>219</sup>

The negative criticism that *Senna* and *Amy* received reveals some intriguing issues around authenticity and identity. Beyond a categorical statement of whether the films are ‘truthful’ or not, they instead encourage us as viewers situated in a highly mediated social environment to question how one defines an individual’s identity. Alain Prost and Mitch Winehouse clearly have a different version of events and relationship with Senna and Amy in mind compared with the filmmakers and some audiences. It is not productive to say that one should be privileged over another, but it can help us to understand how subjectivity is constructed in our everyday lives. Additionally, these two documentaries are constructed in ways that open up such debates. The next section of this chapter examines how these performing bodies are visualised in each film.

### 3.2 Mediated Bodies and Spectacular Display

In his introduction to *Heavenly Bodies*, Richard Dyer writes that, ‘the processes of manufacturing an appearance are often thought to be more real than the appearance itself – appearance is mere illusion, is surface.’<sup>220</sup> Dyer is commenting on the nature of film stardom and how it is communicated through the body by analysing the book’s cover image of Joan Crawford applying makeup in front of various mirrors. The photograph visualises the process of mediation which is key to star and celebrity theory and, increasingly, how we as individuals form and exhibit images of ourselves to the digital world. What we know about a film star or popular celebrity is almost always communicated through media. For the film spectator watching *Senna* or *Amy*, their impressions of the central subjects will be guided by the films’ use of archive material from radio interviews, television interviews and newspaper reports of public appearances, not to mention the documentaries themselves. Therefore, to fully understand how Kapadia’s films construct and shape Ayrton Senna and Amy Winehouse’s identities and our responses to them, we need to explore how mediation works, which requires further discussion of celebrity and star discourses.

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<sup>218</sup> Saner, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/may/01/mitch-winehouse-interview-amydocumentary-film> accessed 16/05/18

<sup>219</sup> Saner, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/may/01/mitch-winehouse-interview-amydocumentary-film> accessed 16/05/18

<sup>220</sup> Richard Dyer, ‘Introduction’ in *Heavenly Bodies* Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2013), p.1

Our modern-day use of the term 'celebrity' to describe a well-known person coincided with the 'rise of democratic governments and secular societies' and the fall of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Court society.<sup>221</sup> That is to say that with the weakening of the upper classes, fame and the power that went with it became more attainable for the mass public. This sense of the term is seen in the Latin root *celebrem*, meaning 'fame' or 'being thronged', and *célèbre*, from the French, means 'well known in public'.<sup>222</sup> For Chris Rojek, the increased popularity of the term was the result of three historical processes: the democratisation of society; the decline in organised religion; and the commodification of social life.<sup>223</sup> P.D. Marshall emphasises the celebrity's role in modern society writing that, 'celebrity as a concept of the individual moves effortlessly in a celebration of democratic capitalism'.<sup>224</sup> To summarise, 'celebrity', as a form of popular cultural status, is dependent on an individual's appearance in public (which necessarily entails the private) and a degree of commodification of their image, which, in capitalist society, is usually shaped or controlled by dominant media systems. After all, 'images have to be made. Stars are produced by the media industries.'<sup>225</sup>

For my discussion about the performing bodies of Ayrton Senna and Amy Winehouse, celebrity raises a number of issues. Firstly, how do images of celebrities reach us as audiences? Who controls these? And what kind of power does an individual have over their own public image? Rojek is unequivocal on this point:

[T]he question of who is attributing celebrity status is moot. Celebrities are cultural fabrications. Their impact on the public may appear to be intimate and spontaneous. In fact, celebrities are carefully mediated through what might be termed chains of attraction. No celebrity now acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries who operate to stage-manage celebrity presence in the eyes of the public.<sup>226</sup>

These 'cultural intermediaries' include television, film studios, talent agencies, newspapers and entertainment websites. According to Rojek, the celebrity seems to have little to no control over their own image. On the other hand, and writing over a decade later, Marshall suggests an alternative view which reflects the changes that have occurred in how we communicate with each other in the digital world. These 'cultural intermediaries' fall within what Marshall terms

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<sup>221</sup> Chris Rojek, 'Celebrity and Celeboids' in *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), p.9

<sup>222</sup> Rojek, p.9

<sup>223</sup> Rojek, p.13

<sup>224</sup> P.D. Marshall, 'Tracing the Meaning of the Public Individual' in *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* New Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p.4

<sup>225</sup> Dyer, p.4

<sup>226</sup> Chris Rojek, 'Celebrity and Celeboids' in *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), p.10

'representational media' and function to 'embody a populace' by disseminating images and opinions on issues or people, in the case of celebrities, that attempt to 'represent a culture'.<sup>227</sup> Related to this is 'presentational media', which assigns much more control to the individual whose image is being used. It is media 'that is performed, produced and exhibited by the individual or other collectives and not by the structure of representational media which is almost by definition large public and private media corporations'.<sup>228</sup> Examples could include online social networking accounts, like Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. Indeed, the companies provide the representational structures through which an individual is able to post content, but here the celebrity or 'average user' can update, change and control their image more than they are able to do compared to representational media. Marshall offers a perceptive interpretation of this new digital commodification of the self:

Through technology, the socially networked individual has become more prevalent in the creation of contemporary culture and a linchpin in the organization and flow of cultural forms and practices. The number of followers on Twitter, the number of views for a particular YouTube video or image on Tumblr, the tracking of Twitter hashtags' virality, and the number of friends on Facebook are defining the new metrics of fame and, by implication, value and reputation. Emerging from these forms of social media, fundamental to presentational culture and its presentation of the self, is a greater portion of the populace engaged in processes of an attention economy that used to be the province of celebrities.<sup>229</sup>

If celebrity status is now more achievable for the masses, technology has been utilised as the mediator to fame. Consider the 'overnight successes' of singers Justin Bieber and Susan Boyle. Thanks to YouTube, they are, in many ways, the twenty-first century equivalent of Classical Hollywood's 'American Dream' where anyone could be 'discovered' and propelled to global stardom. Concerning how we construct and conduct our identities in everyday life, it is interesting to note how Marshall's terms for mediation – representational and presentational – echo Thomas Waugh's acting styles and Goffman's theories of 'social identity' and 'personal identity', where the former is the impression of a person received by a bystander and the latter how a person expresses themselves.

The second issue concerns authenticity. Due to the fact that our impression of the celebrity arrives to us mediated, we are prompted to compare this representation with what we already know about the person from other information channels. This is what Dyer terms 'really'; what is

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<sup>227</sup> P.D. Marshall, 'Persona Studies: Mapping the Proliferation of the Public Self, *Journalism*, 15 (2), 2014: 153-170; 160

<sup>228</sup> P.D. Marshall, p.160

<sup>229</sup> P.D. Marshall, 'Introduction: Celebrity in the Digital Era; A New Public Intimacy' in *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* New Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p.xxiv<sup>23</sup>

the star or celebrity 'really' like?<sup>230</sup> For the film spectator, this process is akin to identity sleuthing.

We piece together available information about the individual – their screen representation, magazine reports, social media newsfeeds – in order 'to know the authentic nature of the star beyond the screen'.<sup>231</sup> The search for authenticity is particularly appropriate for documentary film, which has always been assumed to present the facts. However, as Marshall notes, because of limitations on access and the infinite dissemination of information online, our view of an individual's identity is always incomplete.<sup>232</sup>

Although we may never get to know the 'real' or complete identity of a celebrity, their appearances raise a third and final issue to be discussed here:

Stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society; that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person, of the 'individual'. They do so complexly, variously – they are not straightforward affirmations of individualism. On the contrary, they articulate both the promise and the difficulty that the notion of individuality presents for all of us who live by it.<sup>233</sup>

Representations of the star or celebrity in documentary film could be celebratory or uplifting accounts of a person's achievements and positive impact on society. Or they could be cautionary tales about the negative consequences fame can have for lives lived to excess. Both possibilities are seen in *Senna* and *Amy* and will be explored later. In either case, stories about celebrities reveal aspects of our contemporary societies, precisely because it is through these social communication systems (media) that we encounter stars.

Rojek, following on from Dyer, explains how we as consumers use these images of celebrities. As cultural currency, photographs of stars are similar to dressed mannequins in shop windows. They are examples of the latest fashion, body and hair styles. When English footballer, David Beckham, arrived for a match sporting a mohawk hairstyle, people went to their barber and asked for the same. Equally, high-profile celebrities like Kim Kardashian have had a direct impact on the way some women view their bodies with an increase in requests for so-called 'tush-enhancing'.<sup>234</sup> However, famous individuals not only display the latest fashion trends, they also show us the

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<sup>230</sup> Dyer, p.2

<sup>231</sup> Marshall, 'The Cinematic Apparatus and the Construction of the Film Celebrity', in *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* New Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p.85

<sup>232</sup> Marshall, p.85

<sup>233</sup> Dyer, p.7

<sup>234</sup> Carly Stern, 'Butts are on the rise! Plastic surgeons see major tush trend as requests for derriere implants and lifts continue to grow - thanks to Kim Kardashian, Nicki Minaj, and J.Lo', *Daily Mail*, 28/12/2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3376356/Butts-rise-Plastic-surgeons-major-tush-trendrequests-derriere-implants-lifts-continue-grow-thanks-Kim-Kardashian-Nicki-Minaj-J-Lo.html> - accessed 07/06/18

latest ways to behave or perform in public: 'Celebrities simultaneously embody social types and provide role models'.<sup>235</sup> Furthermore, because of the discursive frame of 'really' and the splitting of authentic person and individualised performance it entails, celebrities also demonstrate performative identity or 'the active construction of identity in the social world'.<sup>236</sup>

So, what are these bodies 'doing' in *Senna* and *Amy*? And how are they being 'done', how are they being represented? Firstly, the two documentaries visualise their central subject's bodies in forms of spectacular display. I refer here to the work of Keith Beattie, who defines 'documentary display' as, '[D]ocumentary in which the visual realm is maximised as the field of exhibitionistic, expressionistic and excessive attractions'.<sup>237</sup> Within this Beattie includes three characteristics of documentary display. These are: 'the performative body as the focus of spectatorial attraction'; 'image enlargement through magnification, whether cinematic microscopy or IMAX frame and screen enlargement'; and, 'the sensational bodily affect exemplified in images that evoke tactility or a pleasurable sense of shock'.<sup>238</sup>

The performative body is most affectively seen in *Senna* through archive footage, where he is depicted performing extraordinary feats of driving. Senna became known for taking daring risks during adverse weather conditions and we see him colliding with professional teammate (personal adversary?) Alain Prost on numerous occasions when spotting an opportunity to overtake. The speed and intricacy needed to negotiate the Monaco Grand Prix is visualised through a first-person camera on board Senna's car where he says that he was not even conscious of driving, so at one was he with the vehicle. Later, Senna would win his first Brazilian Grand Prix under significant physical duress when his gearbox malfunctioned. In each case, the spectator is encouraged to marvel at the driver's skill and courage. In *Amy* various performances take place. Central to this is when she is seen performing onstage throughout her career, recording in studios and appearing in interviews on television. As her health deteriorates – linked to alcohol, drug dependency and bulimia – Winehouse's body is given even greater focus as the film chronologically documents how it alters. The film begins with a home video of the singer aged sixteen and singing with school friends. By the end of the documentary, the spectator is encouraged to contrast this vibrant, happy young woman with the gaunt, damaged body seen onscreen.

Manipulation of the film image through either magnification or microscopy, Beattie's second feature of documentary display, is characteristic of the majority of live sporting events more

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<sup>235</sup> Rojek, p.16

<sup>236</sup> Marshall, p.xlix

<sup>237</sup> Keith Beattie, 'Introduction' in *Documentary Display* (London: Wallflower, 2008), p.4

<sup>238</sup> Beattie, p.4

generally. This relates to the work on ESPN's sports documentaries by Joshua Malitsky, who acknowledges that sports arrive to a spectator always already mediated, through scoreboards, stadium announcers, music, large screen video displays and slow motion, for example.<sup>239</sup> 'Mediation', for Malitsky, therefore has a double meaning. It defines the indirect delivery of information to a viewing spectator at the same time as signalling that these images arrive already altered by the visual apparatus. However, Malitsky continues:

That is not to say that all contemporary sports documentaries seek to draw attention to their own enunciations [although, they do this as well]. Rather, through their use of various media formats and in the way they index historical experience of our own mediated histories, contemporary sports documentaries continually assert that *knowing about sport* requires knowing about and through media. (My parentheses, emphasis in original)<sup>240</sup>

In terms of style, both of Kapadia's documentaries are highly dependent upon mediation. The images in both films are almost exclusively structured out of existing, although perhaps rarely seen, archive footage. Emile de Antonio adopted a similar approach to making films such as *In the Year of the Pig* (1968), calling it "radical scavenging" and consolidating his images within a left-wing political viewpoint.<sup>241</sup> In *Senna* this archive footage includes original broadcasts of the Formula 1 races, behind-the-scenes film in drivers' meetings and in the pits, the driver's appearances on chat shows and entertainment programs and home movies provided by Senna's family where he is seen as a teenager kart racing and on holiday. In *Amy*, the singer is seen performing on popular live music shows, in concert footage captured by audience members, in the recording studio, by news channels hounded by paparazzi, and in home videos by friends and family. As a result of this practice, 'documentary filmmakers decontextualize, entextualize (i.e., produce bounded, isolable interactions distinct from—and hence potentially separable from—their cultural contexts of production), and recontextualize utterances, texts, and interactions.'<sup>242</sup> The only direct evidence that the footage in the two documentaries exists as part of a 'new', constructed documentary (not including editing) is the audio of interviews Kapadia and his team recorded with people significant to the subjects' life stories. The interviewees are never seen being interviewed in the film; they are only heard (more on the significance of this later). The effect created is of a collage of different voices with differing testimonies of the lives seen in the documentaries.

<sup>239</sup> Joshua Malitsky, 'Knowing Sports: The Logic of the Contemporary Sports Documentary', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 41, Number 2, Summer 2014: 205-214; 209

<sup>240</sup> Malitsky, p.211

<sup>241</sup> Betsy A. McLane, 'The 1970s: Power to the People' in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.245

<sup>242</sup> Malitsky, p.210

However, within these mediated images there is further mediation. So, in *Senna*, key sequences from the F1 driver's career – such as the controversy surrounding the 1989 Japanese Grand Prix – are slowed down and replayed through different screens. In this example, Kapadia inserts footage of an F1 commentator stood in front of a large screen which replays the moment Prost and Senna's cars collided. Another example, heavily used in the marketing for the film, emphasises the two drivers' rivalry. They are seen in the pits in discussion with a crewmember. We cannot hear what has been said, but tension is clearly evident. Prost turns and leaves and the news camera captures Senna looking at him, part of his face obscured by the crewmember's shoulder. In Kapadia's film, this image is frozen – Prost and Senna both staring at one another, separated by the crewman. The halting of the film on this image provides a visual summary of the conflict between the two drivers.

In *Amy*, the singer's disastrous appearance at a concert in Serbia, where she was unable and unwilling to perform because of her drug and alcohol dependency, is an example of this mediation. Kapadia frames the episode by cutting between different mobile phone footage shot by audience members and news channels commenting on the event. As we see the singer disorientated and distressed onstage, we hear fans from the crowd shouting and booing. Furthermore, and similarly to the above example from *Senna*, images are given importance through mediation. Kapadia includes newspaper images of Amy and her husband Blake Fielder-Civil emerging from a pub following a late-night drinking session. Blake is bloodied, and Amy's clothes are dirty and torn. Kapadia zooms into these areas of the image, magnifying their importance in the context of Winehouse's descent into addiction.

Multiple effects are created by using these techniques in the two films. Firstly, a spectator is reminded that they are watching versions of an event with no one version given prominence. Secondly, that what the viewer sees is a refracted identity, each visual representation perhaps getting further and further from the subject's authentic self (e.g. when a camera films someone stood in front of a large screen and we see their image reproduced on the screen behind them, getting smaller and smaller within the screen's frame). It also demonstrates how Senna and Amy's image is commodified and packaged within each mediated frame of reference. And this is something the marketing for each documentary does. The film posters are intriguing points of reference here.

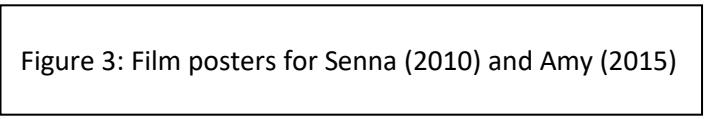
A rectangular box containing the caption text, with a thin black border.

Figure 3: Film posters for *Senna* (2010) and *Amy* (2015)

The poster for *Senna* (Figure 3) emphasises the iconic yellow helmet, the eyes the only part of his body visible, with the helmet merging into the rest of the poster. The same can be seen in the posters for *Amy* (Figure 3), the distinctive eyes and eye makeup and tattoos serving as visual shorthand for her identity. The marketing material for the films seems to confirm Marshall's point that the 'iconic quality of any celebrity is also the zenith of a career. What the icon represents is the possibility that the celebrity has actually entered the language of the culture and can exist whether the celebrity continues to "perform" or dies'.<sup>243</sup> However, Marshall also comments on a negative implication of the celebrity iconic image, writing that 'there is no substance to the sign

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<sup>243</sup> Marshall, p.17

of the celebrity, and without that embedded significance, the celebrity sign is entirely image. To use a Marxian metaphor to describe the vacuity of the sign of the image lacking materiality and productivity, the celebrity sign is pure exchange value cleaved from use value. It articulates the individual as commodity'.<sup>244</sup> If, as we have seen, the current cultural currency of fame operates on the assumption that anyone can become famous, understanding such signs as empty reveals the commodification of our own identities, visible in the packaged appearances we offer on social media posts. Certainly, these promotional images are also mediated versions of their subject's identities, with each poster using pre-existing images, but interpreting them within the context of the documentaries' aims to demystify and decode their famous figures – to reveal the rest of the person. As a result of Kapadia's formal technique and the reliance on pre-existing images in contributing to ideas around Senna and Amy's identities, I would say that, paraphrasing Malitsky's earlier observation, '*knowing about the self* requires knowing about and through media'.

Beattie's third characteristic of documentary display, 'the sensational bodily affect exemplified in images that evoke tactility or a pleasurable sense of shock', is manifested in Kapadia's documentaries through the central subject's negotiation with pain.

### 3.3 Performance and Pain

According to Arne Johan Vertlesen, pain, or the possibility of pain, is an essential part of being human.<sup>245</sup> And it is typically experienced as a negative emotion. Quoting Vertlesen:

I miss the block of wood with my axe and what I hit is my lower leg. I give a start, grimace, see the blood pour out of the cut – warm, dark, ominous. I scream. The sequence of events is so simple; everyone recognizes it: when pain is a stimulus, suffering is the response, understood as the protest made by the organism, a 'no' to what has been inflicted, since it is experienced as something that ought not to be, ought not to happen. The meaning of pain, if we can talk of such, is thus to be understood as the *inherent negativity of pain*.<sup>246</sup>

But Vertlesen goes on to question this unambiguous negation of pain, saying that such a response is historically and culturally-determined. He asks whether it is possible to consider pain as exclusively negative. Is it, instead, something desirable and necessary in constructing identity?

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<sup>244</sup> Marshall, p.xlix

<sup>245</sup> Arne Johan Vertlesen, 'Introduction', trans. By John Irons, *A Philosophy of Pain* (London: Reaktion, 2009), p.7

<sup>246</sup> Vertlesen, pp. 7-8

Other writers, who are specifically concerned with performance studies, comment on the relationship between performance space and the performative body and the ways in which pain, and the bodily markings pain causes, leave traces on both. Stephen Barber is one such writer, and he links these discursive areas to filmed performance, writing that, '[p]erformance is always expansive in its corporeal ramifications, so that the body's presence becomes intensified as it enters and pervades space, and the filmic sequences that seize it, even in fragmentary or disintegrated forms, bear the traces of that intensification of the body in space.'<sup>247</sup> For Barber, the act of filming the body engaged in performance highlights a paradoxical tendency to both drive 'the body's gestures more deeply into itself' while also extracting 'those gestures from the body's surfaces [...] [allowing] them to inhabit the surrounding space, which film is attuned to render in intimacy with the body itself.'<sup>248</sup>

With the body thus given an added intensity due to its being filmed performing, the sensational bodily affects it has on an audience present at the performance, its corporeality, will likewise be exaggerated. Here is Barber again:

The body always leaves marks, both upon performance's spaces and the celluloid surfaces or digital data of moving-image media. Even across the evanescent duration of performance, the body infallibly imprints its trace, however infinitesimal: the scuffing of a heel into a ground-level surface during that body's acts of abrupt turning, the acidic residue of sweat or tears jettisoned from that body onto an adjacent wall by a propulsive movement, or the expulsion of saliva propelled through vocal exclamation onto the clothes or facial contours of nearby spectators. Bacteria, acids, collateral damage and minuscule corporeal traces from performance are marked into its spaces, so that the trajectories of movements and the sonic dimensions of a spectacle may always potentially be reconstituted [...] <sup>249</sup>

And this affect is no different for a spectator not physically in attendance for the performance. The filmed performing body 'constitutes a physical marking, in the retina and brain cells' of those viewers watching the film camera's representation of the event in the cinema or at home.<sup>250</sup> A cursory look at some of the critical and audience reviews of both films highlights their sensuous dimension: 'a truly remarkable and affecting film [...] Kapadia's use of race footage [...] will make even those who find motor-racing a noisy bore feel the visceral thrill of high-velocity

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<sup>247</sup> Stephen Barber, 'Corporeal Projections: Marks of the Body' in *Performance Projections: Film and the Body in Action* (Reaktion Books, Limited, 2014), p. 100

<sup>248</sup> Barber, pp 101-102

<sup>249</sup> Barber, pp 102-103

<sup>250</sup> Barber, pp 102-103

competition'<sup>251</sup>; 'thrilling documentary [...] pure emotion!'<sup>252</sup> Responses such as these to *Senna* highlight the speed of the races depicted during the documentary, which could impact upon the viewer's body through increased heart rate or flinching away from near-misses and collisions. Others comment upon the emotional sadness of the ending. This reaction from a spectator named David George is indicative of many: 'I have [n]ever been moved by a piece of film so much [...] unashamedly tears at your heart [...] I was fighting tears in the cinema, it brought back memories from all those years ago.'<sup>253</sup> This 'fighting' against tears, of emotional pain, relates to Vertlesen's previous points on negating these feelings. Such is the power of the documentary to stir up memories that it causes the body to produce tears, a corporeal reaction, which, in turn, could leave a trace in the cinema screen or other space where the film is viewed.

Spectator reactions similar to these continue with *Amy*. Here are just some: 'It is an overwhelming story'<sup>254</sup>; '*Amy* is an emotionally stirring and technically polished tribute';<sup>255</sup> 'piercingly sad [...] a film that makes you newly angry and sad about losing Winehouse so early'<sup>256</sup>; 'Asif Kapadia's documentary about the tragic singer is a tearjerker. Take tissues.'<sup>257</sup>; 'Heartbreaking and captivating depiction of the life of an incredible talent.'<sup>258</sup> In both cases, the emotional intensity of the viewing experience is stated and will likely endure as a memory after the films have finished, to be triggered whenever the films are mentioned. I have experienced this numerous times when re-watching films. Whether they be horrors, 'tearjerkers' or comedies, the moment at which I previously jumped, wept or laughed is pre-empted, the memory of my emotional reaction to the first viewing recalled and then repeated. A particular scene or line of dialogue acts as a trigger for a form of cinematic regression to that previous mental state. Moments such as the death of a celebrity (or natural disasters, wars, etc.) can be seen as waypoints on a memory map which can be used to help construct or reflect on our identity. For example, we will probably remember where we were when Princess Diana died or when the 9/11 terrorist attacks took place. Similarly, the news of Senna and Winehouse's deaths 'may be a

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<sup>251</sup> Dan Jolin, 'Senna Review' <http://www.empireonline.com/movies/senna/review/> - [accessed 14/07/17]

<sup>252</sup> Username 'tomasdelara', [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1424432/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_urv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1424432/reviews?ref_=tt_urv) - [accessed 14/07/17]

<sup>253</sup> Username 'David George', [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1424432/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_urv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1424432/reviews?ref_=tt_urv) - [accessed

<sup>254</sup> Peter Bradshaw, 'Amy Review: Asif Kapadia's Amy Winehouse film is a tragic masterpiece', *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/16/amyl-review-asif-kapadias-amyl-winehousefilm-is-a-tragic-masterpiece> - [accessed 14/07/17]

<sup>255</sup> Stephen Dalton, '"Amy": Film Review' *The Hollywood Reporter*

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/amyl-film-review-795578> - [accessed 14/07/17]

<sup>256</sup> Robbie Collin, '"Amy" Review', *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/amyl/review/> [accessed 14/07/17]

<sup>257</sup> Dave Calhoun, *Time Out*, <https://www.timeout.com/london/film/amyl> - [accessed 14/07/17]

<sup>258</sup> Username 'themadmovieman', [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2870648/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_urv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2870648/reviews?ref_=tt_urv) [accessed 14/07/17]

significant element in identity formation and the ordering of personal and subcultural history'.<sup>259</sup>

However, instances of physical responses to films are significant to the performing of bodies. As Linda Williams<sup>260</sup> and Jane Gaines have demonstrated, certain types of film encourage mimetic effects on the spectatorial body, 'making the body do things'.<sup>261</sup> Gaines summarises Williams's work on three genres, writing that 'horror makes you scream, melodrama makes you cry, and porn makes you "come"'.<sup>262</sup> However, she includes documentary film as another film form which produces a response in the spectator in the way certain politically-charged films encourage the viewer to continue the fight after the screening.<sup>263</sup> These responses remind the viewer of the existence of their own bodies as they view the documentary subjects who perform their bodies onscreen.

It is striking how both documentaries use pain as a corporeal reminder of its subject's bodily existence. *Senna* and *Amy* use pain as a process through which its individual subject is depicted and understood. Pain is a constant presence throughout each documentary; in *Senna* the potential for pain is there whenever he gets behind the wheel of his racing car, and Winehouse causes pain to herself, her body, through alcohol, drugs and the effects of bulimia. However, during the sequence in which Senna wins the Brazilian Grand Prix for the first time, we can see how physical exertion and intense pain are organised in a narrative framework of success and achievement; it is the price one pays for pushing the body to its limits to attain rewards. As Senna reflects on his triumph at his home Grand Prix, he says that the pain he endured during the race was 'absurd', but ultimately it was necessary to achieve his goal. Bodily suffering is thus described as illogical but summarised by Senna as logical within his sporting aspirations which directly impact upon his identity. Moreover, one imagines that Kapadia deliberately chose to include examples of crashes which caused serious injury, and in the case of Roland Ratzenberger, death during qualifying at the San Marino Grand Prix the day before Senna's fatal crash, as a framing device throughout the documentary to remind the viewer of where the story will conclude. It injects the film with jeopardy and a pervasive threat of pain to the body around every race corner.

For Amy Winehouse, pain is directed inwardly at first and contributes to the performative quality of her body. Stephen Barber summarises:

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<sup>259</sup> Rojek, p.48

<sup>260</sup> Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, Volume 44, Issue 4, Summer (1991), 2-13

<sup>261</sup> Jane Gaines, 'Political Mimesis', in Gaines and Michael Renov (eds.) *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.90

<sup>262</sup> Gaines, p.90

<sup>263</sup> Gaines, p.91

Bodies in performance [...] will accumulate arrays of corporeal markings with an explicitly performative intention in the form of a self-archiving of textual and visual forms: tattooings, piercings and skin incisions, among others. Imprintations into the body are executed with the tips of tattoo needles, or razored, as instruments of performance in the same way that the voice, or the hands, may be perceived as performance's instruments. Such markings into the body accumulate as internally directed (needles and razors are always wielded inwards, or transversally) preparations of the body for performance, but at some point the marked body will undertake an inverse manoeuvre to face outwards, towards its spectator's eyes and external spatial locations [...]<sup>264</sup>

Thus, for Barber, Winehouse's body – her tattoos, needles used to 'shoot up' and alcohol consumption – would be understood as both 'a surface and interior corporeal projection of performance'<sup>265</sup> with the surface of the body performing the function of a diary or biography of the person. A particularly disturbing example in the film sees Winehouse posing for a photoshoot. During a break from the session she is recorded on camera by a friend lying on a sofa, looking dazed. She picks up a shard of glass, presumably a piece of the set for the photoshoot, and begins to trace the outline of 'I love Blake' on her midriff, stating the fact in a childlike voice to the person holding the camera. She does not pierce her skin, but nonetheless, this moment demonstrates her intent at self-marking and self-archiving; her story written on the body through wounding. This example exists as an extreme counterpoint to Kapadia's formal technique of superimposing the lyrics Winehouse is singing on the image during the rest of the film.

One of the main issues the documentary debates is how Winehouse's drug and alcohol dependency is linked to her identity as a musical artist where she uses life events as lyrics to her songs, which, as mentioned above, are displayed onscreen when she sings them. Her celebrity status and heightened visibility is suggested as one reason for her 'self-sabotage' (as some of those interviewed state in the film). Drugs and drink both function to erase her discomfort with fame and turbulent relationships, but ultimately cause the logical conclusion to a life with too much pain – death. Both films end with the deaths of their subjects and show that pain inflicted onto the body, and the sensations caused, reminds the subject and spectator of the body's existence – a process of performing the body, creating an identity.

Sociological research into the dying or dead body stresses the centrality of the body in the formation of identity. Glennys Howarth, citing the work of B.S. Turner<sup>266</sup>, writes on the topic from the basis that the traditional sociological view that mind and body are separate entities, 'with the

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<sup>264</sup> Barber, p.111

<sup>265</sup> Barber, p.110

<sup>266</sup> B.S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984)

mind as the source of social being and the body as a mere container' is limiting.<sup>267</sup> Instead, Howarth theorises our bodies as being both able to shape and be shaped by the self, meaning that our bodies 'are crucial to self-identity and are significant markers of values in society'.<sup>268</sup> As such, it would seem that the possibility of dying and/or death itself exists as a constant and definitive threat to subjectivity.<sup>269</sup> Howarth summarises that the 'dead body is a signifier of mortality and as such is deemed dangerous at two levels: physically it is polluting, and symbolically it represents dysfunction and disorder.'<sup>270</sup>

Howarth's signification of the dead body links to Julia Kristeva's theorisation of 'the abject' and the resultant loss of self that occurs – the abject is 'opposed to *I*'.<sup>271</sup> It signifies a disassociation from self and disturbs a person's identity and, for Kristeva, the corpse is the ultimate signifier of the abject:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance [...] refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver.<sup>272</sup>

For an individual to live, to constitute a fully-formed identity, this threat of the abject corpse must be negated, for if they are shown such an object their sense of self is in danger of falling apart. But does where a person might see a corpse matter in terms of retaining their identity? For instance, does it need to be in 'reality' or can it be viewed on a cinema screen? Howarth comments on cinematic representations of death in mainstream genre films, such as Westerns, science fiction and horrors:

One particularly notable feature of these types of film is that although death is present, it is distanced from the audience and bears little resemblance to the everyday experience of dying. In these cinematic depictions the deaths that occur are accompanied by little or no dying – a single bullet, the swift removal of a head with a sword. They may be violent, but these deaths are not the ones that happen to 'us'. They are not deaths that follow protracted periods of illness – they

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<sup>267</sup> Glennys Howarth, 'The Dying and the Dead Body' in *Death and Dying: A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge : Polity, 2007), p.177

<sup>268</sup> Howarth, p.177

<sup>269</sup> Howarth, p.177

<sup>270</sup> Howarth, p.186

<sup>271</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection' in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.1

<sup>272</sup> Kristeva, p.3

happen to cartoon characters, criminals, or members of gangster organizations, people from the distant past with whom we can no longer identify and those from alien worlds or non-Western cultures. Death is 'othered' and as such, although it may be horrific and violent, people in the developed world can watch without too much anxiety as it is not the type of death that they expect for themselves.<sup>273</sup>

The distance between us and the dying or dead onscreen is further highlighted by the physical distance between the viewing space and the film itself. They are occurring on different planes of action, at different times and, sometimes, in different worlds or realities altogether. However, the documentary film, with its presupposed closer link to the 'real' world and depiction of 'real' people, results in this distance between spectator and onscreen death being shrunk. We may be expected to recognise the people in the documentary, to empathise with their plights, and to know that what happens to them, how they died, is factual. Therefore, with these discussions in mind, I will now examine how the deaths of Senna and Winehouse are positioned and visualised within their respective documentaries.

The first thing to note is that both documentaries include the deaths of their subjects at the end of each film. There is either no, or very little, mention of their fates during the documentaries. Of course, a viewer may bring their own knowledge of the event to the screening, but Kapadia's narrative technique related to how he organises the archive material is linear; beginning with the subjects' childhood or early lives, onto their rise to fame including the trials they had to endure and concluding with their deaths and legacy. The construction enables the spectator to orientate themselves within a clearly defined life story, being told as if for the first time (indeed, many of the archive images were newly discovered as Kapadia and his team researched the films).

The effect this also has is to give the inclusion of the subjects' deaths even more impact. As mentioned above, the filming of Senna and Winehouse's bodies is imbued with an intensity because we see them 'doing' their bodies and, subsequently, performing their identities. They are also almost always depicted in the images as part of Kapadia's strategy to include only the recordings of interviews over archive footage. With no other visual point of reference, when this central focus of our attention, our sympathies, and identity is suddenly eliminated, it has a destabilising effect on our own sense of self. We are reminded of the fragility of our bodies and, hence, our very identity, which is intensified when the documentaries show the prone and lifeless body of Senna on the racetrack and Winehouse's corpse being stretchered away in a body bag from her London flat.

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<sup>273</sup> Howarth, 'Death and the Media' in *Death and Dying: A Sociological Introduction*, pp 103-104

However, death is not the end of a body's signification. Embalmers and morticians will begin work on the dead body to prepare it for burial, attempting to 'humanise' it, 'making it appear more lifelike and transforming the body from a defiling object to a representation of its former self.'<sup>274</sup> This process is a final attempt to reclaim, to stabilise the person's identity, and the two films discussed here can be interpreted as recreating this procedure. Just as death is not the end for the body, so the documentaries provide codas to their subject's stories which follow archive footage of the funerals for Senna and Winehouse.

In *Senna*, Kapadia includes a segment from a press conference where Senna is asked by a journalist 'which driver he idolised the most, past or present?' He pauses before stating that it was a driver he raced with during his years on the go-kart circuit. Kapadia cuts to older footage of this time in Senna's life. Senna mentions how this type of racing was not dogged by politics, that it was 'pure driving'. This final sequence leaves the spectator with a sense of what Senna was searching for throughout his life and, perhaps, something to which modern Formula 1 racing should aspire. In *Amy*, images from the funeral service are this time followed by various close-ups of the singer seen smiling, joking around with the camera, her big piercing eyes emphasised. Each image freezes before cutting to the next, performing the snapshots of a photo album. In each case, the viewer is left with an image of the documentary subject re-invigorated, reborn(?), the films performing the function of embalmers to temporarily preserve the bodies of their subjects. The very final shot of each film is of Senna and Winehouse staring directly at the camera in what could be interpreted as an invitation to the spectator to consider their own bodies and identities.

### 3.4 Voice, the Body and Identity

In the final part of this chapter, I will turn to an assessment of the importance of the 'voice' in *Senna* and *Amy*. So far, we have seen how the two subjects' bodies are represented as mediated in the documentaries, but so are their voices, how they speak. Kapadia's formal technique of relying on archive images overlaid with recorded interviews therefore determines how his participants are heard by the spectator and how identities are constituted.

A common feature of critical writing on the voice is the difficulty with which it is defined. It is slippery, amorphous and often confused with the speech act. Jacob Smith provides a sense of the voice's multifaceted nature:

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<sup>274</sup> Howarth, p.187

The voice can function as an index of the body, a conveyor of language, a social bond, a musical instrument of sublime flexibility, a gauge of emotion, a central component of the art of acting, and a register of everyday identity. The voice is slippery, easily sliding between these categories, sometimes functioning as a conscious expression, other times as an unintended reflection of the self [...] Our voices reveal our social roles, and at the same time they are intimately connected to our individual bodies and our most closely held sense of identity [...]<sup>275</sup>

Here Smith suggests that our voice is both embodied and crucial to how we identify ourselves. Other writers, however, attempt to separate the voice from the body. Michel Chion states that, '[t]he voice is elusive. Once you've eliminated everything that is not the voice itself – the body that houses it, the words it carries, the notes it sings, the traits by which it defines a speaking person, and the timbres that color (sic) it, what's left?'<sup>276</sup> The answer might be 'not much'. The voice may be best described as the carrier of words, musical notes and signification. It thus facilitates an impression of the identity we wish to represent.

Chion is writing about sound films and, in this positing of the voice as separated from the physical body, he draws a parallel between the dislocation of sound and image in "talkies":

A film's aural elements are not received as an autonomous unit. They are immediately analyzed and distributed in the spectator's perceptual apparatus according to the relation each bears to what the spectator sees at the time. (First and foremost: according to whether you see in the image the source attributed to the sound – for example, if words are heard, whether or not you see the person who is speaking.) It's from this *instantaneous perceptual triage* that certain audio elements (essentially those referred to as synchronous, i.e., whose apparent source is visible onscreen) can be immediately "swallowed up" in the image's false depth, or relegated to the periphery of the visual field, but on alert to appear if there's a sound whose cause is temporarily put offscreen. Meanwhile, other aural elements, notably background music and offscreen commentary, are triaged to another place, an imaginary one, comparable to a proscenium.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Jacob Smith, 'Introduction', *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, c2008), p.3

<sup>276</sup> Michel Chion, 'Prologue: Raising the Voice' in *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.1

<sup>277</sup> Chion, p.3

Seeing, the image, appears to take precedence over what is heard in Chion's formulation. This stands in contrast with his description of how contemporary Western culture typically operates, which is 'monistic', the idea of the self being consolidated within the body.<sup>278</sup> With this in mind, referring to the sound film, Chion elaborates on its 'dualism', '[t]he physical nature of film necessarily makes an incision or cut between the body and the voice. Then the cinema does its best to re-stitch the two together at the seam.'<sup>279</sup> This process is called synchronisation and it was used to reunite the celluloid images and soundtrack in order to optimise spectator intelligibility of the film. However, for Chion (and others), synchronisation rather calls attention to the fact that the image and sound – and thus the body and voice – '*doesn't stick together*'.<sup>280</sup> Indeed, we need only to think of the frustrating and disturbing effects created when we watch a film whose image and audio are slightly out of sync to understand how crucial the unity of this relationship is to the viewing context. But what are the reasons for and effects created when sound and image do not exist together, when a filmmaker purposely separates them? For example, when the body of the character/subject is not visible onscreen even though their voice is heard?

If this is the case, '[i]f an actor's mouth isn't visible onscreen, we cannot verify the temporal coincidence of its movements with the sounds we hear.'<sup>281</sup> In other words, because we cannot locate the physical body of the speaker from which the sounds emerge, we are unable to fully identify them, in terms of knowing who they are. This may sound obvious, but this is important for a person when forming a fully-rounded identity is at stake. For Chion, who is writing about fiction film, this device 'functions not so much to guarantee truth, but rather to authorize belief.'<sup>282</sup> In a later work, he uses the example of a radio announcer to whom one listens every day. We may only know what they sound like, but this limited amount of information may not stop us from imagining what they look like. Even so, it assigns a limit on their identity, '[f]or there is a considerable difference between taking note of the individual's vocal timbre – and *identifying* her, having a visual image of her and committing it to memory and assigning her a name.'<sup>283</sup> Therefore, in order to fully identify someone, we need to see them as well as hear them.

Nevertheless, when considering film sound, it is usually the case that the voice takes precedence. Other sounds, such as background noise, diegetic and non-diegetic music, occupy a subordinate

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<sup>278</sup> Chion, 'Nine: The Voice that Seeks a Body' in *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.125

<sup>279</sup> Chion, p.125

<sup>280</sup> Chion, p.126

<sup>281</sup> Chion, p.127

<sup>282</sup> Chion, p.127

<sup>283</sup> Michel Chion, "The Three Listening Modes" in *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, c1994), p.27

position when a human voice is heard. Chion mentions this characteristic of classical fiction film, calling it 'vococentrism', expanding that '[i]n actual movies, for real spectators, there are not *all the sounds including the human voice. There are voices, and then everything else.*'<sup>284</sup> The effect created in this 'hierarchy of perception' is that the '*human voice structures the sonic space that contains it.*'<sup>285</sup> Part of this process for a spectator will be to both 'localize' and 'identify' the human voice, to determine where and who the person is.<sup>286</sup> In addition to the interpretation of the human voice is the ease with which it is understood:

[...][T]he historical development of synch sound recording technology, for example, the invention of new kinds of microphones and sound systems, has concentrated essentially on speech since of course we are not talking about the voice of shouts and moans, but the voice as medium of verbal expression. And in voice recording what is sought is not so much acoustical fidelity to original timbre, as the guarantee of effortless intelligibility of the words spoken. Thus what we mean by vococentrism is almost always verbocentrism.<sup>287</sup>

The voice and the significance of speech in the communication of 'truth' has been a feature of documentary film throughout its history. 'Verbal testimony', 'voice of God narration' and 'talking heads' are phrases that have become synonymous with nonfiction forms. However, similarly to the discussions about *Senna* and *Amy* displaying their mediated bodies, in Kapadia's films it can also be said that of equal importance is the way voices are mediated.

As has already been noted, Kapadia's formal technique relies on the use of archive footage which is accompanied by the sound recording of his interviews with people involved in *Senna* and *Winehouse*'s stories. We never see these individuals being interviewed. Kapadia has explained that his reasons for deciding to structure his documentaries in this way stemmed from his time working in television journalism and returning to film school at the Royal College of Art. In the case of the former, Kapadia reflects on how he disliked the cheap production values and fast turnover where the quickest and easiest program format was the interview, which privileged the spoken word.<sup>288</sup> His style therefore is a response to this, honed making dialogue-light films at college, in that *Senna* and *Winehouse*'s lives are 'told through the images' first and foremost.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Chion, p.5

<sup>285</sup> Chion, p.5

<sup>286</sup> Chion, p.5

<sup>287</sup> Chion, 'Projections of Sound on Image' in *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, pp 5-6

<sup>288</sup> Rachael Steven, 'Story Before Script: *Senna* and *Amy* Director Asif Kapadia on his Documentary Process' <https://www.creativereview.co.uk/senna-amy-maradona-director-asif-kapadia-process/> - [accessed 14/07/17]

<sup>289</sup> Tim Lewis, 'Film-maker Asif Kapadia: "Maradona is the third part of a trilogy about child geniuses and fame"', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jun/25/asif-kapadia-diegomaradona-senna-amy-interview> - [accessed 14/07/2017] <sup>290</sup> Chion, 'One: The Acousmêtre' in *The Voice in Cinema*, p.21

However, the decision to relegate his recorded interviewees to off-screen brings with it its own effects.

On the one hand these unseen voices we hear in the documentaries fit within Chion's definition of the '*acousmêtre*' in fiction films.<sup>290</sup> This describes a human voice who is heard although not visible onscreen; 'a kind of talking and acting shadow' who occupies a liminal space within the film's diegesis, at once present but also hidden.<sup>290</sup> The *acousmêtre* has a number of characteristics and powers. Firstly, due to the fact that they initially appear without a physical body, the *acousmêtre* 'possesses a sort of virginity' and is imbued with the connotations of innocence and purity this label brings.<sup>291</sup> Secondly, they have 'the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power. In other words: ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence.'<sup>292</sup> These qualities of the *acousmêtre* translated to documentaries means that the people we hear but do not see speaking are invested with a significant amount of power and their spoken testimony, as a consequence of their 'virginity', is coded to be accepted as 'true'.

The way the *acousmêtre*'s voice is recorded is also significant in this process and is situated within what Chion terms the 'I-voice'. Two technical criteria are mentioned which provide evidence as to how the voice is mediated:

First, *close miking*, as close as possible, creates a feeling of intimacy with the voice, such that we sense no distance between it and our ear. We experience this closeness via the sure-fire audio qualities of vocal *presence* and *definition*, which manage to remain perceptible even in the worst conditions of reception and reproduction, even through the low-fidelity medium of the telephone. [...] The second criterion derives from the first: "dryness" or absence of reverb in the voice (for reverb situates the voice in a space). It's as if, in order for the I-voice to resonate in us as our own, it can't be inscribed to a concrete identifiable space, it must be its own space unto itself.<sup>293</sup>

However, this unequivocal power comes at a price. Since we are unable to see the person speaking, we are not able to identify them; the subject's identity is not fully-formed. Additionally, the *acousmêtre*'s power is fragile:

Of course, the *acousmêtre* has only to show itself – for the person speaking to inscribe his or her body inside the frame, in the visual field – for it to lose its power, omniscience, and (obviously) ubiquity. I call this phenomenon de-acousmatization. *Embodying the voice* is a sort of symbolic act,

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<sup>290</sup> Chion, p.21

<sup>291</sup> Chion, p.23

<sup>292</sup> Chion, p.24

<sup>293</sup> Chion, 'Three: The I-Voice' in *The Voice in Cinema*, p.51

dooming the *acousmêtre* to the fate of ordinary mortals. De-acousmatization roots the *acousmêtre* to a place and says, “here is your body, you’ll be there, and not elsewhere.”<sup>294</sup>

It is at this point where defining Kapadia’s interviewees as *acousmêtres* is problematised. Indeed, the speaking subjects are never seen speaking as they are interviewed. However, they are seen and heard speaking in archive footage, their recorded testimony by Kapadia often framing their images onscreen. Therefore, the spectator is able to visualise the *acousmêtre* by comparing the characteristics of the person’s voice in the recorded interviews with their visual counterpart in the image. Furthermore, the use of intertitles stating ‘voice of’ aids the spectator in this process of embodying and identifying the unseen interviewees. In *Amy*, the lyrics of her songs are written onscreen as she sings them, and in *Senna* subtitling when he speaks Portuguese are more examples of the mediation of the subject’s voice.

The effects of positioning the friends, relatives, and experts involved in *Senna* and *Winehouse*’s life stories as present but offscreen is significant and comes back to the perceptual hierarchy mentioned earlier. In describing the vococentrism of sound films, Chion mentions how other sounds, like offscreen commentary, ‘are triaged to another place, an imaginary one, comparable to a proscenium.’<sup>295</sup> In other words, their speech forms the frame or margin of the main stage on which *Senna* and *Winehouse* perform; the documentary itself.

In contrast to the interviewees, the words of *Senna* and *Winehouse* we see and hear onscreen are inseparable from the time and place in which they are said. This, obviously, is due to the fact that they are no longer alive to tell their stories, so, in this way, they are unable to be anywhere or ‘anywhen’ else within the documentary. However, it also has the added effect of giving their appearance and voice in the documentaries impact and poignancy. They cannot be *acousmêtres* in the formal logic of Kapadia’s films. Their body’s voices are not present to be recorded, meaning they are unable to suffer ‘de-acousmatization’. Consequently, their voices cannot be embodied. They are left to wander within the documentary frame as ghosts, with any spoken information about their identities now delegated to those who knew them. Perversely, this means that representations of their identities are the most consistent throughout each documentary; their voices and bodies cannot exist anywhere else than in the films’ arrangements of archive footage.

I return to this issue of visibility in the next chapter on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus (LGBTQ+) documentary. In heteronormative society, the ability for the LGBTQ+ community to openly express their identities is challenged. As a result, numerous LGBTQ+ documentary filmmakers have emerged, making films which represent and celebrate diverse queer identities. /

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<sup>294</sup> Chion, pp. 27-28

<sup>295</sup> Chion, p.3

*Am Divine* (Jeffrey Schwartz, 2013) and *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* (Fenton Bailey & Randy Barbato, 2016) will serve as case-studies. These documentaries, about individuals who consciously incorporated performance elements into their public displays of queer identity, build upon some of the themes I have already discussed. These include the multiple interpretations of what exactly constitutes the 'self' and how their professional work (Divine's films with John Waters and Mapplethorpe's photographs) combined with the private revelations of those who knew them, provides traces or 'palimpsests' to help us decipher their identities. Added to these though, is the concept of how Divine and Mapplethorpe actively sought to create a 'queer space' within heteronormative society where work, lives and loves could be viewed. As will be seen through details of the documentaries' structure, design and exhibition, this is also a challenge the filmmakers accepted.



## Chapter 4    LGBTQ+ Documentary

In Chapter 2, which examined three recent autobiographical documentaries, I demonstrated how each filmmaker emphasised the dichotomy of internal/external spaces related to their formulation of 'self', i.e. how an interior psyche affects the external body (and vice versa) and the subject's relationship to the space around them. For documentaries about and/or made by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) people, this binary can become a heightened source of social, political and legal importance. Globally, members of the LGBTQ+ community are subject to various forms of discrimination and prejudice with numerous countries' penal codes dictating long prison sentences or even execution for those found guilty of committing homosexual acts.<sup>296</sup> Unsurprisingly then, much critical literature in lesbian and gay studies emphasises themes of in/visibility and inclusion/exclusion. With these terms in mind, this chapter will analyse how contemporary documentary films with LGBTQ+ subjects represent identity through performance by examining two case-study films; *I Am Divine* (Jeffrey Schwartz, 2013) and *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* (Fenton Bailey & Randy Barbato, 2016).

Both films highlight elements of the performative – in this case gender performativity and sexual performativity – over the course of developing their central subject's identity. The documentaries were chosen due to their focus on two figures who, in LGBTQ+ circles at least, are relatively well-known. Their notoriety stems from the deliberate 'playing up' of stigma symbols which are, according to Erving Goffman, social markers which disqualify the individual from 'full social acceptance'.<sup>297</sup> Divine transgresses traditional notions of gender identity while also undercutting, through grotesque exaggeration, drag performance. Meanwhile, Robert Mapplethorpe questions established positions of subject and object through his self-portraits of Bondage/Domination/Sadism/Masochism (BDSM) culture. As a result, each subject constructs highly visible displays of a marked identity which can be interpreted as 'lightning rods' for broader debates around LGBTQ+ representation.

The marketing and distribution strategies of each film are notable for their contrasting negotiations of in/exclusive space for this representation. *I Am Divine* was shown globally at various festivals, including South by Southwest in Texas and through lesbian and gay film specific festivals such as those in Tokyo, Paris and Belgrade. In the United Kingdom, the film was

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<sup>296</sup> Louis-Georges Tin (ed.) translated by Marek Redburn, Alice Michaud & Kyle Mathers, *Dictionnaire de l'homophobie/The Dictionary of Homophobia: a Global History of Gay & Lesbian Experience* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, c2008), p.1

<sup>297</sup> Erving Goffman, 'Preface' in *Stigma: Notes of the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1968), p.9

distributed on DVD through Peccadillo Pictures which specialises in LGBTQ+ arthouse and world cinema. Furthermore, director Jeffrey Schwartz has mentioned that 'the entire film was funded by Divine's fans from around the world' through online crowdfunding platforms.<sup>298</sup> The distribution emphasis appeals to those already familiar with Divine's star image, building on the midnight movie cult following associated with director John Waters. Therefore, it can be said that the target audience for *I Am Divine* is niche and probably predominantly LGBTQ+. On the other hand, *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, a globally recognised 'brand', before debuting on the Home Box Office (HBO) television channel in America. These are more mainstream and commercial distribution spaces which, combined with the film's provocative images, could be interpreted as an attempt to create a limited and short-term LGBTQ+ space within dominant, heteronormative viewing practices. This chapter will address these issues of visibility and in/exclusive spaces to be found in the two films and analyse how performance is central to the construction of the subjects' 'queer' identities. Analysis of these films will raise issues related to LGBTQ+ experience in the wider social and cultural sphere. With this in mind, I conclude with an assessment of installation films by LGBTQ+ artists to explore the discursive links between these more experimental films and LGBTQ+ subjectivity; the notion that we 'see differently'.<sup>299</sup> However, first some historical context of the connection between LGBTQ+ life and documentary film.

Perhaps the earliest example of the association between lesbian and gay life and the documentary form can be seen in the film *Anders als die andern/Different from the Others* (Richard Oswald, 1919). The story of two male musicians who fall in love and the scandal it causes is ostensibly fiction. However, an abridged version of the film was included by its co-writer, Magnus Hirschfeld, a 'physician and ardent gay activist in the Weimar Republic', in a separate documentary titled *Gesetze der Liebe/The Laws of Love* (1927) in which he appears as himself when Paul (Conrad Veidt) visits a doctor.<sup>300</sup> Consequently, the film blurs the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction by using a story of homosexual love within a didactic/educational film that seeks to inform public opinion.

According to Richard Dyer, *Anders* furthered an 'in-between-ist' definition of homosexuality where lesbians and gay men were viewed as a 'third sex' at a time when gender and sexual

<sup>298</sup> Joy Zaccaria, 'Spotlight: Jeffrey Schwartz' in *Digital Video*, May 2013, Vol. 21, Issue 5, p.16

<sup>299</sup> Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs, 'Introduction' in *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.2

<sup>300</sup> Patrick Cardon, 'Cinema' in Tin (ed.) translated by Marek Redburn, Alice Michaud & Kyle Mathers, *Dictionnaire de l'homophobie/The Dictionary of Homophobia: a Global History of Gay & Lesbian Experience* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, c2008), p.103

identities were often conflated.<sup>301</sup> Therefore, 'a man was a heterosexual man, a woman a heterosexual woman, and it followed that people who were not heterosexual were therefore neither one thing nor the other, neither a real man nor a real woman but something in-between.'<sup>302</sup> It is already evident here that in order to affirm a gay identity it is necessary to construct a specific gay space (whether discursive or geographical) within existing (heteronormative) space. However, this space was contested.

In Weimar Germany, when *Anders* was made, there was no official state legislation regarding film censorship. However, at the local level, police ordinances would intervene in cases where films being shown appeared to contravene traditional, heterosexual models of behaviour, such as '*Aufklärungsfilme* and *Sittenfilme* (sexual enlightenment and sexual morality films)', of which *Anders* was an example.<sup>303</sup> National regulations changed with the introduction of the *Reichslichtspielgesetz* ('Reich Motion Picture Act') in 1920, which 'imposed a ban in principle on all films, requiring them to be examined by a state censorship board prior to being passed for release.'<sup>304</sup> In August 1920, it was ruled that *Anders* could not be shown 'except to certain categories of people, such as doctors and medical personnel in educational establishments and institutes of research.'<sup>305</sup> As a result, national censorship restricted the space in which the film could be shown, excluding it from being widely exhibited.

Similar cases can be seen in other national contexts. In America, the adoption of the Hays Code for censorship from 1930 to 1966 affirmed that the moral sympathies of the viewing audience should 'never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin'.<sup>306</sup> Therefore, lesbian and gay depictions on screen were few and far between. Those that did appear in mainstream films were often either incidental to the main plot or were shown as such through euphemism. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), based on the book of the same name by gay rights activist Vito Russo, demonstrates how numerous films fell afoul of the censors and had their storylines and characters changed to hide any evidence of homosexuality.

This sort of representational subterfuge was often found in film noir of the 1940s and 1950s which, for some critics, fitted within the genre's themes of narrative uncertainty, mystery and

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<sup>301</sup> Richard Dyer, 'Weimar: Less and More Like the Others' in *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (New York: Routledge, 1990) pp 17-18

<sup>302</sup> Dyer, pp 17-18

<sup>303</sup> Martin Loiperdinger, 'State Legislation, Censorship and Funding' in Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter and Deniz Göktürk (eds.) *The German Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 2008), p.149

<sup>304</sup> Loiperdinger, p.149

<sup>305</sup> Cardon, p.103

<sup>306</sup> Cardon, p.102

duplicity.<sup>307</sup> The fact that in films such as *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) and *Strangers on a Train* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1951) the spectator was unsure who the killer was or who was telling the truth could also become a question of 'who was queer?' Characters from these films, who may or may not be gay, were represented according to contemporary stereotypes. Therefore, the men are 'fastidiously and just a little over-elaborately dressed, coiffed, manicured and perfumed, their speech is over-refined and their wit bitchy, and they love art, antiques, jewellery and cuisine'.<sup>308</sup> However, Richard Dyer notes the difficulty of making the queer visible in these films:

Stereotypes of, say, blacks or the disabled tell us that people who look like that are like this in character; stereotypes of queers seem to work in the same way (men and women who dress like that are like this), but they are founded on the opposite need, to say people who are like that (queer), even though you can't see that, look like this. Queer stereotypes are posited on the assumption that there is a grounding, an essential being which is queer, but since this is not immediately available to perception, they have to work all the harder to demonstrate that queers can be perceived. In other words, the problem with queers is you can't tell who is and who isn't — except that, maybe, if you know the tell-tale signs, you can.<sup>309</sup>

The visible display of signs in these examples of film noir – meaningful glances between characters, costume, delivery of dialogue – become cues (and indeed clues) for the spectator to identify and interpret within a film style whose narrative trajectory involves finding out the truth.

Similarly, in Britain any overt gay or lesbian characters were marginalised or non-existent. It was not until the 1950s and the high-profile trials involving Lord Montagu, Michael Pitt-Rivers, and Peter Wildeblood for homosexuality that the issue received substantial social attention. As a result, in 1957, Lord John Wolfenden and his committee published their report which had investigated 'homosexuality and its implications for British social life and the law'.<sup>310</sup> It recommended that homosexuality in private between two consenting adults of at least twenty-one years of age be legalised. The findings proved highly divisive among the British public, as did the subsequent release of films dealing with the topic, such as *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (Ken Hughes, 1960), *Oscar Wilde* (Gregory Ratoff, 1960), and *Victim* (Basil Dearden, 1961).<sup>311</sup> These were by no means mass-appeal films. The British Board of Film Classifications (BBFC) passed them as 'X' certificates and, in the case of *Victim*, only after some of the homosexual content had been

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<sup>307</sup> Richard Dyer, 'Queer Noir' in *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.90

<sup>308</sup> Dyer, p.96

<sup>309</sup> Dyer, p.97

<sup>310</sup> James C. Robertson, 'The Later Talkies' in *The Hidden Cinema* (Taylor and Francis, 2005), p.119

<sup>311</sup> Robertson, p.119

toned down.<sup>312</sup> Where, then, could a spectator find depictions of gay life in film? And how could a gay filmmaker exhibit their work?

In keeping with the themes of in/visibility and internal/external spaces, gay films and filmmakers turned to ‘underground’ methods; an unfortunate yet apt metaphor for the contemporary gay experience. These films, mainly made in America from the 1940s to 1960s, were low budget shorts whose “undergroundness” was partly their refusal of Hollywoodian qualities of finish and clarity, and partly their breaking of (mainly sexual) taboos, so that production and screenings were socially, economically and sometimes legally marginal and questionable.<sup>313</sup> This proved to be the case with high-profile screening raids by police of gay underground films such as *Un chant d'amour* (Jean Genet, 1950), *Flaming Creatures* (Jack Smith, 1963) and *Scorpio Rising* (Kenneth Anger, 1963).<sup>314</sup> Each of these films, in different ways, sought to display the gay identity of its maker and are therefore personal projects. As Dyer asserts, ‘[i]f the point of underground cinema was to be personal, then any gay man making a film was liable to include gayness: being “personal” inextricably entailed being gay.’<sup>315</sup> However, due to a combination of these films being difficult to get to see and the idiosyncratic and personal nature of them, gay underground film was often overlooked or disregarded by lesbian/gay audiences who sought a unifying identity.<sup>316</sup>

This search for a common identity through representation in film began to take shape in the 1970s in America; and documentary film was pivotal. Galvanised by the Stonewall riots of 1969, an increase in the number of independent film companies and 16mm market, and easier access to film cameras, this decade in the United States saw the proliferation of what Dyer terms ‘affirmation films.’ These were films, mainly documentaries, which would ‘show the reality of our existence – the fact of our existence and what our existence was really like.’<sup>317</sup> Documentary film, because of its supposed closer connection with the representation of reality, meant that lesbians and gay men could appear in these films to prove their existence. Some examples include *Portrait of Jason* (Shirley Clarke, 1967) *Word is Out* (Mariposa Film Groups, 1977) and *Gay USA* (Arthur J. Bressan Jr., 1978) and used contemporary documentary techniques associated with *cinema verité*

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<sup>312</sup> See Robertson’s discussion of *Victim*, which includes letters sent from Director John Trevelyan to the film’s writers, pp 119-125

<sup>313</sup> Dyer, ‘Underground and After’, p.102

<sup>314</sup> Dyer, pp 102-103

<sup>315</sup> Dyer, p.172

<sup>316</sup> Thomas Waugh, ‘Walking on Tippy Toes: Lesbian Gay Liberation Documentary of Post-Stonewall Period’ in Holmlund and Fuchs, eds., *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.122

<sup>317</sup> Dyer, ‘From and For the Movement’, pp 236-237

- such as talking head interviews - to advance a sense of LGBTQ+ community. As the name suggests, the affirmation films were positivist and sought to dispel negative stereotypes of lesbians and gay men presented in homophobic rhetoric and the mainstream media.

However, as both Waugh and Dyer have identified, affirmation films and their aim to create a unified, inclusive, visible representation of gay life is somewhat contradictory. For one thing, it assumes that all lesbians and gay men have the same lesbian/gay experience and it does not account for personal differences.<sup>318</sup> Waugh describes the context of gay documentary in the 1980s:

Quite simply, the antistereotype (sic) rhetoric of positive images, role models, and community enfranchisement did not always fit realist documentary idioms, whether observational or interactive, that had evolved in order to communicate the texture of individual experience and were weighted with a liberal heritage of voyeurism and victim aesthetics. Films deploying collaborative and expressive "performance" seemed to surmount this problem, especially those dealing with the past or present private space of personal identities and relationships, with sons, daughters, and lovers.<sup>319</sup>

As a result of these personal performance documentary films often not being consistent with a positivist image of LGBTQ+ people the films above sought to advance, they were often marginalised and underappreciated, as with the fictional underground films in the late 1960s. These conflicting attitudes towards what counts as the 'official' image of lesbian and gay life – affirmation versus individualism – can be seen during the pre-Stonewall period. Organisations like the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis, which worked to improve public perception of gay men and lesbians respectively, furthered an image of homosexuality which played down cultures of cross-dressing, cruising, and participation in the bar scene.<sup>320</sup> Here inclusion/exclusion is present even within lesbian and gay circles.

Although lesbian/gay 'personal performance' documentaries may not have been widely seen – which is perhaps true of LGBTQ+ film in general – the move to video beginning in the 1980s meant that greater numbers of lesbian and gay filmmakers were able to make such films due to lower costs and easier to use cameras.<sup>321</sup> Whether filmed on video or not, what emerged during this time and after was an autobiographical trend of personal 'coming out' stories or more

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<sup>318</sup> Dyer, p.173

<sup>319</sup> Waugh, p.117

<sup>320</sup> Marc Siegel, 'Documentary That Dare/Not Speak Its Name: Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*', in Holmlund and Fuchs, eds., *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.94

<sup>321</sup> Betsy A. McLane, 'Video Arrives' in *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2012), p.273

intimate portrayals of lesbian and gay life. Some examples include *Black Star: Autobiography of a Close Friend* (Tom Joslin, 1977) and its follow-up *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (Peter Friedman and Tom Joslin, 1993) as well as Barbara Hammer's *Tender Fictions* (1996) and Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003). Additionally, Derek Jarman made innovative use of home movies in *The Last of England* (1987). Furthermore, later developments in digital technologies and social media meant that individuals could share their lesbian and gay experiences instantly online. But what exactly does this performance of individual homosexual identity mean and what forms does it take in wider society and specifically in documentary film?

Sociologist Erving Goffman, writing in 1968, includes homosexuality as a social stigma; that is, a marker which disqualifies an individual from full social acceptance.<sup>322</sup> Goffman continues by describing evidence of stigma as 'reflexive and embodied' and so communicated by the person through bodily expression via 'stigma symbols'.<sup>323</sup> For the lesbian/gay man these could range from (self-evident) sexual relations with someone of the same sex to less obvious symbols which have developed in society and culture over time, for example drag queens and kings, effeminate behaviour in gay men and particular ways of dressing or acting.

In the interest of self-preservation an individual may want to conceal their stigma symbol(s), which means that visibility is important for someone who is stigmatised.<sup>324</sup> However, the opposite could be true when an individual draws attention to their stigma in attempts to change social, political perception of them and their group in what Goffman terms 'militancy'.<sup>325</sup> In LGBTQ+ experience, the most obvious example is the Pride parades that are organised around the world. However, events such as these often only occur on a single day within a designated space that is specific to LGBTQ+ people and their supporters. What about the rest of the year? How do we know how to act and where? Diana Fuss has highlighted these epistemological questions as particularly significant to LGBTQ+ experience:

How does one know when one is on the inside and when one is not? How does one know when and if one is out of the closet? How, indeed, does one know if one is gay? The very insistence of the epistemological frame of reference in theories of homosexuality may suggest that we cannot know – surely or definitively. Sexual identity may be less a function of knowledge than

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<sup>322</sup> Erving Goffman, 'Preface' in *Stigma: Notes of the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1968), p.9

<sup>323</sup> Goffman, 'Information Control and Personal Identity', p.59

<sup>324</sup> Goffman, p.65

<sup>325</sup> Goffman, 'Group Alignment and Ego Identity', p.139



performance, or, in Foucauldian terms, less a matter of final discovery than perpetual reinvention.<sup>326</sup>

For Fuss – and Judith Butler in her essay in Fuss’s edited collection where she talks about the ‘I’ and a lesbian ‘I’ constituted through repeated performance<sup>327</sup> -- lesbian and gay identity requires performance because stigma symbols are usually not immediately visible. In any event, within a heteronormative society where displaying the existence of different sexual identities could result in discrimination, an LGBTQ+ person may want to keep such markers hidden. Therefore, the social performance of certain signs or ways of speaking – often subtle and available only to those ‘in the know’ – have historically been used by LGBTQ+ people as a way of identifying others ‘like them’. See for example Polari, a form of spoken slang which emerged in Britain out of the theatre and circus cultures during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was adopted and adapted by the gay community ‘for reasons of self-protection, secrecy, and statement of common identity.’<sup>328</sup> Also enlightening is Marc Lewis’s detailed description of the intricacies of performance within the gay bar scene and ‘cruising’ with gesture and physical posture substituting for verbal communication.<sup>329</sup> Once again, as social theorist Wayne H. Brekhus summarises in his analysis of gay identity in American suburbia, we can see that ‘*who* one is depends, in part, on *where* one is and *when* one is. Identity resides not in the individual alone, but in the interaction between the individual and his or her social environment.’<sup>330</sup>

The social environment for lesbian and gay documentary filmmakers in the post-Stonewall period was, according to Thomas Waugh, characterised by a sense of protest and struggle for visibility. Performance began to be introduced into the nonfiction films of this period as a means of combatting the invisibility many lesbians and gay men experienced:

Parents of gay filmmakers of the seventies thought that performance had something to do with homosexuality [...] and indeed, the films and videos made by their sons and daughters seemed to bear this out. Their performance-based techniques included particular inflections of standard interviewing, editing, and expert testimony styles, "coming out" variations of consciousness-raising formats borrowed from women's movement documentaries, and expressive elements that were more theatrical than the standard documentary idiom of the day allowed: dramatization,

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<sup>326</sup> Diana Fuss (ed.), ‘Inside/Out’ in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp 6-7

<sup>327</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination’ in Fuss (ed.), p.18

<sup>328</sup> Leslie J. Cox and Richard J. Fay, ‘Gayspeak, the Linguistic Fringe: Bona Polari, Camp, Queerspeak and Beyond’ in Stephen Whittle (ed.) *The Margins of the City: Gay Men’s Urban Lives* (Aldershot: Arena, 1994), p.110

<sup>329</sup> Marc Lewis, ‘A Sociological Pub Crawl around Gay Newcastle’ in Whittle (ed.), pp 93-94

<sup>330</sup> Wayne H. Brekhus, ‘Gay Suburbanites: A Case Study in the Grammar and Microecology of Social Identity’ in *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs: Gay Suburbia and the Grammar of Social Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.17

improvisatory role playing and reconstruction, statements and monologues based on preparation and rehearsal, and nonverbal performances of music, dance, gesture, and corporal movement, including those of an erotic and diaristic nature.<sup>331</sup>

Dyer proposes the reason for this more pronounced ‘aestheticism’ of gay documentaries as being to do with a reflection of the ‘surface’ homosexuals had to manage in order to pass for heterosexual which, by doing so, acknowledges ‘the artificiality of reality’.<sup>332</sup> LGBTQ+ people spend so much attention to how they present their identity that it is perhaps understandable that an LGBTQ+ documentary filmmaker will emphasise the look of their films. As such, these films can be understood as performative of LGBTQ+ identity with heightened style performing the social reality experienced by many individuals who must constantly monitor their behaviour and adapt to specific locations and situations.

In this context, it is significant that the process of ‘coming out’ can be considered as a performative act, both related to an individual’s own statement of their homosexuality – to themselves, friends, family – and then also within LGBTQ+ documentary when they recreate/restate this very moment of ‘coming out’.<sup>333</sup> This ‘act’ also highlights the themes of in/visibility and the significance of space which are the focus of this chapter. Dyer explains the social significance and particularly cinematic effect of the process when he writes that ‘coming out’, ‘is making visible something that is not merely invisible but also deemed worthy of extermination. It is dangerous, moving and dramatic, the stuff of a good picture.’<sup>334</sup> Fuss then expands upon the spatial consequences for the ‘out’ lesbian or gay man:

To be out, in common gay parlance, is precisely to be no longer out; to be out is to be finally outside of exteriority and all the exclusions and deprivations such outsiderhood imposes. Or, put another way, to be out is really to be in – inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible.<sup>335</sup>

However, ‘coming out’ is rarely as clear cut as one would suppose. As Butler explains, this has to do with the very object from which we must escape if we are to construct a unified identity; the closet. As previously mentioned, lesbian and gay identity is only rarely apparent on the site of the body and so it is likely that ‘coming out’ will be an ongoing process for LGBTQ+ people throughout their lives. This means that ‘being “out” must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as “out”’.<sup>336</sup> For example, an individual moves town and starts a new job

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<sup>331</sup> Waugh, p.109

<sup>332</sup> Dyer, pp 65-66

<sup>333</sup> Waugh, pp 119-120

<sup>334</sup> Dyer, p.249

<sup>335</sup> Fuss, p.4

<sup>336</sup> Butler, p.16

leaving those friends and colleagues who knew of their sexuality. They are then introduced to their new workmates, but for that time, to this new ‘audience’ they are – in a heteronormative society – assumed to be straight and consequently back ‘in’ the closet. This perpetual ‘coming out’ necessitates the reconstruction of the (performative) closet and also highlights the importance of the spectator in the process. The saying goes that ‘if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?’ Modified to fit LGBTQ+ experience, we can ask, ‘If a gay person ‘comes out’ and no one is around to hear it, does the person exist?’

It is these discussions about performativity both within and without LGBTQ+ documentary and the complex interactions of body and space, visibility and invisibility which are the focus of the subsequent analysis of the two chosen case-study films. *I Am Divine* and *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* have been selected due to their focus on two highly visible figures in LGBTQ+ culture. Divine, as a ‘larger-than-life’ drag queen and cinematic muse of director John Waters, is a counter-cultural personality whose association with gay underground film in the 1970s and 1980s raises pertinent issues surrounding visibility and gender performativity. Schwartz’s film seeks to uncover what the man, Harris Glenn Milstead, was ‘really’ like and in doing so comments upon the divide between public and private identities. American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe similarly fashioned a career and public image out of provocative images. These became performative when he began to appear in his own sexually explicit photos, which caused outrage amongst some American right-wing politicians. *Look at the Pictures*, the title coming from one such senator Jesse Helms, addresses the dichotomies that exist within Mapplethorpe’s work and own representation of self. What follows is an analysis of both films and their subjects in terms of in/visibility and in/exclusion with a focus on gender performativity in *I Am Divine* and sexual performativity in *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures*. To begin with, and related to themes of in/visibility and internal/external spaces, ‘Camp’ theories provide a route into analysing the two films.

## 4.1 *I Am Divine* and *Maplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* as ‘Camp’ Documentary

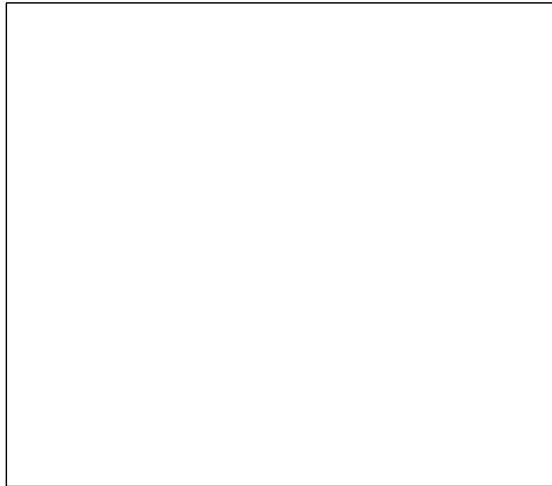


Figure 4: Camp’s love of artifice and exaggeration in the ‘look’ of Divine.

In chapter 2 on autobiographical documentary, I demonstrated how internal subjectivities affected the external representations of spaces in three films. Theories of Camp offer a discursive framework to analyse interiorities and exteriorities which are particularly applicable to LGBTQ+ identities.

In her influential 1964 essay, Susan Sontag defined Camp as a sensibility which privileges artifice and exaggeration, style over political engagement, and is, above all, aesthetic.<sup>337</sup> Sontag observes Camp in androgynous bodies and ‘the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms’ which combine to create the impression of life-as-role.<sup>338</sup> Considering such features, it is not surprising that Camp today has become almost synonymous with the LGBTQ+ community and a gay male means of representation especially. However, Sontag downplays Camp as belonging exclusively to homosexual men, even as she concedes that it does resonate with monitoring performance which is a feature of gay male (and LGBTQ+) experience. But how do *I Am Divine* and *Maplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* fit into Sontag’s formulation of ‘Camp’?

<sup>337</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on Camp’ in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), pp 277-291

<sup>338</sup> Sontag, pp 277-291

Taking each subject of the documentaries first of all, we can see that Divine displays Camp's 'love of the unnatural', of artifice and exaggeration.<sup>339</sup> She wears dresses that are far too small for her so as to emphasise her weight and shaves her hair back in order to make more room for more eye makeup (Figure 4). As seen in the documentary, the various drag balls which Milstead attended before 'becoming' Divine exemplify Sontag's 'Being-As-Playing-a-Role'<sup>340</sup> with men performing as women. But they also demonstrate the 'failed seriousness'<sup>341</sup> associated with Camp when Milstead realised his drag performances did not conform, so he decided to make fun of them instead leading to his exaggerated character of Divine. There is also the sense that Divine as character goes beyond Camp. Her foul-mouthed rants at spectators during her live shows and the roles she played in John Waters films can be interpreted more as kitsch or trash in their supposed aim to offend, shock and disgust audiences. Nevertheless, the documentary itself displays markers of Camp in its aesthetic design. Animation is used to reinforce moments from Milstead/Divine's life such as when, to signpost an examination of Divine's childhood, we see a pink flamingo drop a sack down a chimney. This acts as both a reference to the old wives' tale of a crane delivering a baby and the Waters film *Pink Flamingos* (1972). Later, a college yearbook opens and sits on a background of gaudy red velvet in a revision of the opening of numerous Disney animations of fairy tales. This then leads onto friends reflecting on Milstead's introduction to the drag 'scene' and the revelatory effect this had on him, which is accompanied by a photo of Milstead with his parents, Milstead's form being cut out of the picture and darting off-screen to a cartoon running sound. These examples seem to correlate with Sontag's description of Camp as fascinated with the surface or appearance of objects, the object in the last case being the film itself.

Robert Mapplethorpe could be considered a less obvious Camp figure. However, there are points of comparison with Sontag's schema. As an artist and photographer, he was obsessed with the 'look' of his work. In the documentary we hear from one of his photography lab technicians who would have to spend hours 'touching up' Mapplethorpe's photos. We also see Mapplethorpe during a photo shoot instructing his model how to pose, not satisfied until he had the perfect shot. Furthermore, Mapplethorpe's own 'look' is often described as androgynous; Fran Lebowitz describes him as a 'spoiled cupid' in the film (Figure 5). The aesthetic style of *Look at the Pictures* is perhaps more 'performative' than Camp (more on this later), but there are instances where the visuals become more prominent and even fetishised, which complement Mapplethorpe's later work with leather and BDSM culture. For example, in the opening section of the documentary

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<sup>339</sup> Sontag, pp 277-291

<sup>340</sup> Sontag, pp 277-291

<sup>341</sup> Sontag, pp 277-291

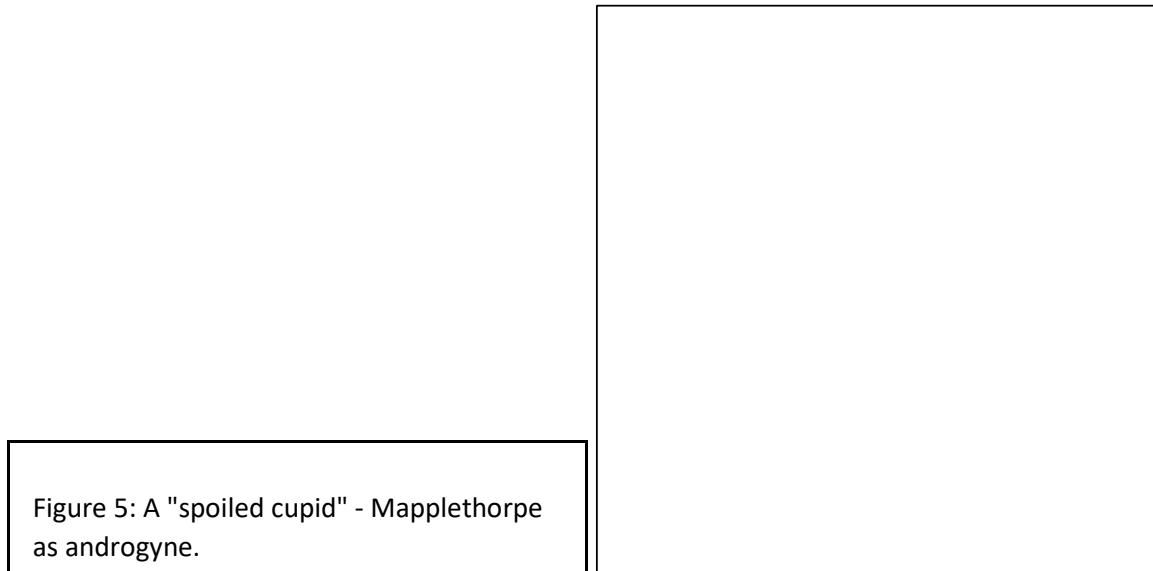


Figure 5: A "spoiled cupid" - Mapplethorpe as androgynous.

which focuses on his childhood, Mapplethorpe's sister mentions that her brother was the neighbourhood pogo champion. Over the interview a black and white sequence plays of a child on a pogo stick. Just their feet are visible and as the sequence progresses in slow motion dust particles are disturbed with each jump. The use of black and white cinematography with deliberate studio lighting expresses Mapplethorpe's subsequent aesthetic while also creating the Camp impression, due to the sequence being staged, that the self is a role that is performed.

As we have seen here, each of the film's subjects and visual style can be described in Camp terms. However, Sontag's essay is not the only way of reading Camp. Re-evaluating Sontag's theory, Moe Meyer opposes this description of Camp as purely aesthetic and apolitical. For him Camp – or queer parody – is political, solely a queer and/or lesbian and gay discourse which 'embodies a specifically queer cultural critique'.<sup>342</sup> Meyer therefore stresses the very aspect of Camp which Sontag sought to obscure; that Camp belongs to queer subjectivities. Furthermore, for Meyer, Camp constitutes the language through which a queer identity is performed with the aim of producing 'social visibility'.<sup>343</sup>

This is where Camp is politicised. Not just associated with objects, but viewed instead as a sign of queer agency, it is critical of dominant heteronormative representation and provides the means by which the marginalised queer subject can begin to enter into signifying practices. This is achieved through the, in Meyer's terms, 'un-queer' who appropriates Camp traditions and in so doing believes that they have nullified any radical queer transgressions into the dominant social order. However, according to Meyer:

<sup>342</sup> Moe Meyer, 'Introduction' in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.1

<sup>343</sup> Meyer, p.5

[...] because the queer constitutes him-/herself processually (sic), the un-queer is now unwittingly performing the queer. The final effect is the reproduction of the queer's aura by the un-queer camp liberator who has been transformed into a drag queen with no other choice but to lip-synch the discourse of the Other. While [the] camp cognoscente has successfully appropriated the signifying surface, the lyrics were still written by the queer who has now entered representation by producing his/her visibility on the back of the un-queer bourgeois subject. It may be the bourgeois subject who sings the aria but, like the terrifying phantom of the opera, it is the queer who taught her how, and who still plays the "organ" accompaniment behind the wall of enforced invisibility in the sewer system of "history's waste."<sup>344</sup>

Therefore, the marginalisation of Milstead/Divine and the demonisation of Mapplethorpe as shown in each documentary occurs as a result of their attempts to establish themselves in the dominant, heterosexual order. Meyer's political rendering of Camp raises a number of issues which are relevant to my discussions of LGBTQ+ documentaries. Firstly, that Camp as performed by the un-queer highlights the performativity of social roles generally. Jack Babuscio, who attributes Camp as the expression of a gay sensibility, develops this point when he writes how Camp reveals that 'life itself is role and theatre, appearance and impersonation.'<sup>345</sup> In other words, on learning that Camp and its queer visual codes are being performed by an un-queer subject, the viewer can appreciate that forms of 'being' other than those defined as dominant and heterosexual exist and can be adopted by those who might not identify as the 'self' they perform. Secondly, and evident in the appropriated 'signifying surface' from the quote above, is the notion of Camp as a means of producing interior and exterior identities. This requires further explanation and Meyer again proves useful.

Meyer identifies the first use of the term 'Camp' in England to 1909 when cited in J. Redding Ware's *Passing English of the Victorian Era*.<sup>346</sup> In his dictionary of contemporary Victorian slang, Ware defined Camp as 'Actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis. Probably from the French. Used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character'.<sup>347</sup> Within Ware's definition, Meyer makes the following observations:

If [...] specific gestures identified simultaneously by exterior excess (Ware's "exaggerated emphasis") and interior lack (Ware's "exceptional want of character") are constitutive markers of homosexual identity, then the first text reference to Camp in 1909 already encodes a homosexual subject. This coding is noticeable both by its definition based on excess/lack and through its

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<sup>344</sup> Meyer, p.17

<sup>345</sup> Jack Babuscio, 'Camp and the Gay Sensibility,' in *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (London: BFI, 1977), p.44

<sup>346</sup> Meyer, 'Under the Sign of Wilde: An Archaeology of Posing', in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.75

<sup>347</sup> J. Redding Ware, *Passing English of the Victorian Era* (EP Publishing, 1972) cited in Meyer, p.75

attribution of these gestures to the French: the discourse of English Francophobia included the assumption that homosexuality was a French import.<sup>348</sup>

Already established here is the significant dichotomy of internal/external to LGBTQ+ experience. However, contrary to contemporary Victorian bourgeois liberalism which attributed an internal essence as cause and external sign as effect, Meyer problematises such a distinction through the use of two French theoretical imports.<sup>349</sup> The first comes from novelist and playwright Honoré de Balzac who, in his 1830 essay *Traité de la vie élégante*, suggested 'four signifying practices for an organized (sic) system of self-representation – posture, gesture, costume, and speech' and claimed to be able to identify the type of person based on these bodily clues.<sup>350</sup> Balzac extended his theory to include a rethinking of the cause and effect chain so that 'if a specific interiority produced a single exterior signification, then the reverse would also be true – a single exteriority would produce a corresponding interiority – permitting one to compose the self as one composed a painting.'<sup>351</sup> The second theory from acting teacher, François Delsarte, similarly proposes 'that a self-reflexive exterior signification could control and produce interior states through composition of gesture, posture, and voice' as Delsarte developed a system of vocal training at his school in Paris between 1839 and 1871.<sup>352</sup> Therefore, this interpretation proposes that rather than a Camp mannerism being solely an external signifier of a queer (or LGBT) internal self, these very ways of performing which are visible outside can be utilised by the subject to modify identity within, thus further highlighting the mutability and performativity of social roles. Meyer uses these frameworks to discuss the changing identity of Oscar Wilde after returning from the United States where he had learnt about the Delsarte method and traces the effects this had upon the writer leading up to his trials in 1895. For Meyer, the trials represented an opportunity and space for the formation of a queer social identity in Victorian England with Camp being the language with which to define this identity. But how are these interior and exterior identities negotiated within the two documentaries?

This occurs through the narrative trajectories of both films which establish their subjects as having conflicting (queer) identities and craving social acceptance. In *I Am Divine*, Milstead's persona of Divine is constructed as an exaggerated external effect of his internal gay identity. However, later in his career when he wanted to break into mainstream film and become an established star, Milstead comes to resent his 'alter ego', stating in interviews that Divine was 'the best and worst thing' that ever happened to him. This was due to the fact that Divine-as-

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<sup>348</sup> Meyer, p.76

<sup>349</sup> Meyer, pp 78-80

<sup>350</sup> Balzac cited in Meyer, p.78

<sup>351</sup> Meyer, pp 78-79

<sup>352</sup> Meyer, p.80

exterior-sign had come to dominate all aspects of Milstead's identity. To combat this, and as an example of the reversal of the cause and effect chain as theorised by Balzac and Delsarte, Milstead would appear on talk shows as 'himself', never wearing the costumes of Divine or of the characters Divine played in public. Therefore, the exterior sign has been changed in order to compose a different interior self which, in this case, was also an attempt to shift public perception from Milstead-as-Divine to Milstead-as-Milstead.

The end of the documentary, in contrast to this reactionary move, suggests that Milstead's star status could have been achieved as a result of his image as Divine. Schwartz's film opens and closes with the premiere of *Hairspray* (John Waters, 1988) to give this moment in Milstead/Divine's life added importance. The film is described as the vehicle which brought Waters and Divine to a wider public and helped secure Milstead a recurring role, as a male character, on popular sitcom *Married with Children* (1987-1997). The documentary ends on a tragic note as we learn that Milstead died of a heart attack days before his first read-through. In the end then, the dual identities, each formed through the interplay of exterior and interior signs, both played an equal role in Milstead/Divine's lasting star status.

Mapplethorpe in *Look at the Pictures* is represented through interviews as extremely ambitious in his attempts to achieve fame as an artist, and the various subjects of his work – collages which reinterpret gay porn magazines, BDSM poses, flowers, depictions of the black male body – all represent elements of his autobiography; in other words, what interested him as a topic at any given time. The work becomes the external signifier of his (queer) identity. But equally these shifts in subject matter can be interpreted as Mapplethorpe's negotiation of his internal identity.

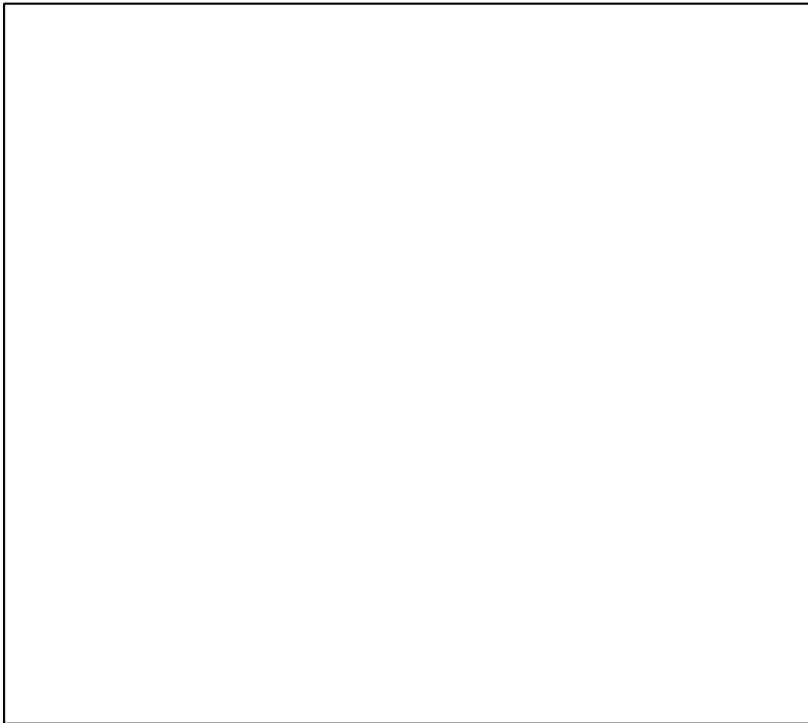


Figure 6:

Mapplethorpe's BDSM photos display explicit homosexual male identity.

This is most clearly evident in his participation in his self-portraits engaged in sexually explicit poses. He began this phase in his career by visiting leather and fetish clubs to pick up men who would perform as his models (Figure 6). The resulting photographs display a frank gay male sexuality which could be seen as the external sign of his own sexual identity. However, the collapsing of object/subject which occurred when he began to appear in these photographs demonstrates how he reconfigured his own view of 'self' so that he became a visible presence of a homosexual identity within his own work. So, instead of these pictures exemplifying an outward representation of the artist's internal self, that which is presented in the images – the artist's unashamed homosexual identity – becomes associated by the viewer of the photograph as the artist's internal, 'real' identity. In Balzac and Delsarte's terms the BDSM self-portraits – such as Mapplethorpe's photograph with a whip inserted in his anus – are self-reflexive exterior signs which control and produce the artist's internal identity with a pose that, in this case, exclaims a homosexual male identity.

## 4.2 *I Am Divine and Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures as Performative Documentary*

Camp theories are only one way of analysing these two documentaries. Another, linked to Camp, is an assessment of the films as performative. As already demonstrated when relating the films to

Camp ways of seeing, the issue of in/visibility remains. Referring back to Meyer's quote on the queer critique Camp performs, how can the queer subject demolish the wall and step out from the shadows of the opera house? Moreover, how can the queer subject cease to be the terrifying 'other'? In the two documentaries to be discussed here, the aim of each filmmaker seems to be to 'normalise' or demystify assumptions an audience might have of their respective subjects. *I Am Divine* offers a view of Harris Glen Milstead without the makeup of Divine which, through interviews with close friends and family, portrays him as a quiet, shy and extremely generous man. Similarly, at the beginning of *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures*, one of the curators of the joint LACMA and Getty Institute retrospective of the photographer's work states that their aim is to 'humanise' Mapplethorpe who had been demonised in the American press by conservative politicians and critics. In reviews at least, these aims appear to have been achieved with critics praising the films for their reassessments of the two subjects, and, in *Look at the Pictures*, an appreciation of the artist's explicit photographs rather than the knee-jerk condemnation of Senator Helms and others in the late 1980s.<sup>353</sup> But, regardless of these critical re-evaluations of their subjects and attempts to reach larger audiences (*Look at the Pictures* premiered on HBO in America), these documentaries were not commercial break-out successes. There is, then, a parallel to be made between the documentary filmmakers and their queer subjects; they each sought to create a space, whether on stage, in galleries or in cinemas, in which a visible queer social identity could be displayed.

Firstly, I will examine performative examples from *I Am Divine* which are related to gender performativity. In academic and critical writing on Divine, similar phrases appear: 'first an icon, then a person';<sup>354</sup> 'larger-than-life', 'in-your-face style';<sup>355</sup> 'Cross-dressing diva, countercultural icon and screeching force of nature', 'outré';<sup>356</sup> 'zaftig drag diva and provocateur', 'voracious, foulmouthed, super-plus-sized Halloween cartoon'.<sup>357</sup> These descriptions of a highly visibly marked (gender) identity represent Divine in visual terms and as iconic. Divine's 'look', taboo-shattering characters in Waters' films and self-proclaimed status as 'the filthiest woman in the world' became the image of 'trash' and the outsider for audiences. She was outside traditional

<sup>353</sup> See, for examples of reviews of *Look at the Pictures* which offer a reassessment of the artist's work related to the documentary: Nigel M. Smith, 'Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures' (Review) [https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/23/robert-mapplethorpe-look-at-the-picturesreview-sundance](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/23/robert-mapplethorpe-look-at-the-pictures-review-sundance) - accessed 16/02/17; James Poniewozik, 'Review: 'Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures' on HBO Gives Context to Controversy', April 3, 2016

[https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/04/arts/television/review-mapplethorpe-look-at-the-pictures-on-hbo-gives-context-to-controversy.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/04/arts/television/review-mapplethorpe-look-at-the-pictures-on-hbo-gives-context-to-controversy.html?_r=0) - accessed 06/04/17

<sup>354</sup> Simon Abrams, 'I Am Divine Review', *Village Voice*, Vol. 58 (43), p.44

<sup>355</sup> Joy Zaccaria, 'Spotlight: Jeffrey Schwartz' in *Digital Video*, May 2013, Vol. 21, Issue 5, p.16

<sup>356</sup> Nigel Smith, 'I Am Divine Review' <http://www.gamesradar.com/i-am-divine-review/> - accessed Nigel Smith, 'I Am Divine Review' <http://www.gamesradar.com/i-am-divine-review/> - accessed 16/02/17

<sup>357</sup> Stephen Holden, 'The Man Behind the Hairspray' <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/25/movies/iam-divine-a-biopic-of-the-john-waters-star.html> - accessed 16/02/17

gender roles, conventional drag performance and mainstream film exhibition circuits. As shown in Schwartz's documentary, this 'larger-than-life' character would come to define Milstead's identity.

However, describing Divine as a drag performer is problematic and more complex than it first appears. So, where drag is typically defined as the wearing of clothing associated with one gender by a person of the opposite gender, Divine's appearance – shaved extended forehead to allow room for exaggerated eyebrow makeup and skin-tight polyester dresses which accentuate an overweight figure – suggests something 'other' than drag. As Lindsay Hallam observes, '[w]hile most transvestites strive to pass as female, and drag queens to embody the most glamorous and beautiful aspects of femininity, Divine instead exaggerates feminine traits to the point of becoming grotesque.'<sup>358</sup> In contrast to a documentary such as Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990), which features high-fashion drag performances, *I Am Divine* shows its central figure as spurned from and outside of this world after attending drag balls, and her look becomes the result of this exclusion.

As the documentary demonstrates, how Divine's appearance during her onstage routines and in her film roles relates to gender performativity is significant and should be viewed as a subversion of traditional drag performance. Feminist critics have interpreted female drag by gay men as misogynous, turning feminine characteristics into something to be laughed at and criticised.<sup>359</sup> This view suggests that the male/masculine and female/feminine binary should remain rigid. However, as Butler writes, those genders that are being performed are culturally constructed in the first place. They have not existed for as long as man and woman have existed but have become a reflection of how different societies and periods have decided what man and woman should look like and how they should act; 'drag is not an imitation or a copy of some prior and true gender', rather it is a performative act which highlights gender's 'constructedness'.<sup>360</sup> Viewed in this way, Divine's image subverts expectations of drag performance and demonstrates, in a highly visible way, that society's need for gender identities to remain separate can be problematised. Therefore, Divine is not performing a grotesque parody of femininity, but rather 'calling out' the social structures that put heteronormative definitions of 'man' and 'woman' in place to begin with.

As was shown earlier with the way Divine has been described in the popular press, her image is often associated with a loud and extreme public identity. Indeed, part of Divine's stage act

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<sup>358</sup> Lindsay Hallam, 'Monster Queen', *Bright Lights Film Journal*, February 2010 (67), pp 1-6

<sup>359</sup> Chris Straayer, 'Transgender Mirrors: Queering Sexual Difference' in Holmund & Fuchs (eds.) *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p.207

<sup>360</sup> Butler, p.21

involved singling out members of the audience and verbally abusing them. However, *I Am Divine* evaluates how this public identity often contrasted with Milstead's private identity in its 'man behind the mascara' structure.<sup>361</sup>

Later in his career, Milstead is shown as being uncomfortable with people's assumption that he was exactly like his and Waters' creation. This is evident when Milstead explains how Divine proved an obstacle to him being cast in other films as male characters, such as *Trouble in Mind* (Alan Rudolph, 1985), and when he appeared as a guest of Larry King's and had to clarify that he was not a transsexual. As a result, the 'stigma symbols' which Milstead displayed as Divine had come to define all aspects of his identity, both publicly and privately. The sociological fieldwork into how gay men move within social space conducted by Brekhus proves insightful here. Brekhus discusses the presentation of a gay identity in terms of duration and volume, offering three distinct categories of gay men in the sample he observed: gay lifestylers; gay commuters; and gay integrators.<sup>362</sup> Related to Brekhus's categories, Milstead-as-Divine becomes associated with the 'gay lifestyler' by viewers of his films and stage show:

Gay lifestylers live openly in gay-specific ghettos and organize their life around their marked status. They keep their markedness on "high volume" and do it virtually all the time. They have a high-density, high-duration gay identity. Metaphorically, they are 100 percent gay, 100 percent of the time. Lifestylers take on the grammatical centrality of gayness as a *noun*.<sup>363</sup>

However, the private reality towards the end of Milstead's career was more aligned with Brekhus's formulation of the 'gay commuter':

Gay commuters treat their gay identity as a verb. They live other parts of themselves in heterosexual space and travel to identity-specific spaces to be their "gay self." [...] In much the same way that work commuters travel from the suburbs to the city to do work on weekdays, identity commuters travel from the suburbs to the city to "do identity" on weekends. For them, gayness is a *temporary master status* that they turn on and off depending on their social environment – in gay spaces they often turn their marked identity to high volume, but outside those spaces they turn it off completely [...] Thus, it is a low-duration, high-density gay identity. Metaphorically, they may be something like 100 percent gay, 15 percent of the time.

Schwartz's documentary is often concerned with representing Milstead in opposition to his larger-than-life character by stressing his shyness, humility, and generosity towards his closest friends. The film thus seems to be offering a re-evaluation of Divine by providing its target

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<sup>361</sup> Mike McCahill, 'I Am Divine' (Review) <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jul/17/i-am-divinereview-john-waters-accessed-16/02/17>

<sup>362</sup> Brekhus, p.9

<sup>363</sup> Brekhus, p.28

audience – mainly fans of Waters’ films – with a more detailed view of the subject’s life offstage and off-camera. In other words, *I Am Divine* proposes a renegotiation of Milstead/Divine’s identity for fans and other audiences who may have only heard of him/her in passing. This, to use Brekhus’s terms, shifts Milstead-as-Divine’s transgressive gender identity from a noun to a verb. Therefore, not only does *I Am Divine* show its central character as transgressing gender norms, it also raises the issue of how this public persona was consolidated – often as a source of tension – within Milstead’s private identity. Significant, perhaps, is the recourse to a grammatical explanation of Brekhus’s identity terms. Remember that Austin’s theory of the performative utterance emerged out of linguistics as a phrase which both describes an action and performs that action (such as “I do” at a wedding). Therefore, it is fitting (and presumably accidental) that so many of the interviewees in *I Am Divine* confuse the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’ when discussing their memories of the documentary subject, thus making the film’s themes of gender performativity even more pronounced.

In *Maplethorpe: Look at the Pictures*, performativity and gay identity are constituted through the artist’s appearance in his own work. As such, Maplethorpe adopts the dual roles of observer/photographer and participant/subject. Perhaps the most famous of these photographs – and also the first of its ilk to be shown in the documentary – is where Maplethorpe appears in leather chaps with a whip handle inserted into his anus. His decision to appear in his photographs developed from the view that it was unacceptable to expect his models to perform sex acts in front of the camera if he was not prepared to do the same. As explained earlier, the photograph also demonstrates Maplethorpe’s self-reflexive display of his internal sexual identity through Camp gestures. Again, as with Divine, this becomes a highly visible display of the subject’s gay identity which instead is negotiated around sexual acts that provoke and transgress what is socially and publicly acceptable.

Events came to a head when, in 1989, Maplethorpe’s exhibition titled ‘The Perfect Moment’ toured venues across America. It included various pieces from the artist’s earlier portfolios, including graphic images of gay sadomasochism from the ‘X’ portfolio. Arriving at a time of intense paranoia related to the spread of AIDS, Maplethorpe’s death from the disease during the exhibition’s run, no doubt added fuel to existing conservative political and religious prejudice against homosexuals. Two of the most outspoken opponents of the exhibition were republican politicians Jesse Helms and Alfonse D’Amato, who had recently criticised the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding photographer Andreas Serrano’s ‘Piss Christ’, which depicted a crucifix submerged in a jar of urine.<sup>364</sup> Helms was further outraged to hear that the

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<sup>364</sup> Kevin Moore, ‘Whipping Up a Storm: How Robert Mapplethorpe Shocked America’, *The Guardian*, 17/11/2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/17/robert-mapplethorpe-theperfect-moment-25-years-later - accessed 25/05/18>

NEA had granted 'The Perfect Moment' \$30,000 for its tour and thus moved to introduce legislation that would prevent organisations such as the NEA from sponsoring artists and their work which they deemed 'obscene'.<sup>365</sup> This was the beginning of what became known as the 'American Culture Wars'.

In the spring of 1989, Congress began debating the issue, proposing 'a reduction in the NEA's funding equal to the amount granted to the South-Eastern Center for Contemporary Art and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia [who had already hosted Mapplethorpe's exhibit] and a ban on both institutions from seeking funding for five years'.<sup>366</sup> This 'Helms Amendment' outlined that federal funding should not be awarded to any 'obscene and indecent art and for any work that denigrates, debases or reviles a person, group or class or citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age, or national origin'.<sup>367</sup> Later, in October that year, the Senate approved a less strict 'funding prohibition', which 'prohibited the use of NEA or NEH funds to promote materials that may be considered obscene (and) which do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value'.<sup>368</sup> Nevertheless, the amendment was widely accepted as 'the first restriction on federal art assistance based on content' and thus represented a direct challenge to artistic freedom, and for my research, legislative restrictions to individual expression of identity.<sup>369</sup>

The Senate's vote had an instant impact on the Mapplethorpe exhibit. In Washington D.C., Christina Orr-Cahill, the director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, cancelled their display of 'The Perfect Moment' in fear of prosecution. This decision led to protests outside the venue with some of Mapplethorpe's photographs being projected onto the side of the building, including 'a tattered American flag and a self-portrait of the recently deceased artist, gazing quizzically out over the crowd'.<sup>370</sup> However, perhaps the most intense scrutiny and media attention fell on the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) in Cincinnati, Ohio. Anti-pornography groups and pro-freedom protesters gathered outside the venue and, once the display had opened, local police even seized some of the photographs from the exhibit.<sup>371</sup> This resulted in the CAC director, Dennis Barrie, and

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<sup>365</sup> Douglas McLeod and Jill MacKenzie, 'Print Media and Public Reaction to the Controversy Over NEA Funding for Robert Mapplethorpe's "The Perfect Moment" Exhibit', *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, Summer 1998, 75 (2): 278-291; 278

<sup>366</sup> McLeod & MacKenzie; 281-282

<sup>367</sup> McLeod & MacKenzie; 281-282

<sup>368</sup> McLeod & MacKenzie; 282

<sup>369</sup> McLeod & MacKenzie; 282

<sup>370</sup> Moore, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/17/robert-mapplethorpe-theperfect-moment-25-years-later> - accessed 25/05/18

<sup>371</sup> Moore, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/17/robert-mapplethorpe-theperfect-moment-25-years-later> - accessed 25/05/18

other employees, being indicted 'on charges of pandering to obscenity and the illegal use of a minor in nudity-oriented materials.'<sup>372</sup>

Addressing the controversy later, Dennis Barrie highlights the significance his and his colleagues' acquittal had for the future freedom of artistic expression:

It was fascinating to watch those jurors listen to our colleagues speaking to them in plain and direct terms, telling them that sometimes art is not beautiful, and sometimes it's challenging, and sometimes it's even offensive, and yet it can be art, even if it's all those things. I was watching there [...] and you could see in their eyes that they got it [...]<sup>373</sup>

However, the case also had implications for the expression of homosexual identity. As will be discussed later when analysing the documentary, *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures*, the photographer cultivated a distinctly queer visual aesthetic throughout his career. When investigating Senator Helms's critical reception of Mapplethorpe's work, it is obvious that his reactions are not just explained in terms of the explicit sexual nature of these photographs, but also that they are captured by, and usually include, explicit displays of gay identities.

Richard Meyer has written perceptively on the topic and concludes that in order to get his amendment passed, Helms 'exploited public fears and fantasies about male homosexuality'.<sup>374</sup> A frequent feature of the senator's rhetoric during congressional debates was his description of Mapplethorpe's art as 'sick', making a contextual link between the photographs themselves and the photographer's death from AIDS.<sup>375</sup> However, of particular interest for my discussion about the performativity of these LGBTQ+ documentaries, is how Helms himself contributed to the creation of a queer space within the very building he hoped would help him block homosexual expression. Because, as we see at the beginning of *Look at the Pictures*, Helms went to great lengths to copy and disseminate examples of the images he was so eager to suppress. It would seem that 'censorship cannot resist the images it claim(s) to despise' and, precisely in wanting to ban them, they must be represented.<sup>376</sup> Viewed in this context, *Look at the Pictures* and its performative display of these images, functions as one more expression of resistance against such forces.

The object/subject tension created by Mapplethorpe's self-portraits continued throughout his career. Even after being diagnosed with AIDS the artist sat for a photograph, helped by his

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<sup>372</sup> Dennis Barrie, 'The Scene of the Crime', *Art Journal*, September 1991, Vol.50 (3): 29-32; 29

<sup>373</sup> Barrie; 30

<sup>374</sup> Richard Meyer, 'Mapplethorpe's Living Room: Photography and the Furnishing of Desire', *Art History*, Apr2001, Vol. 24 Issue 2: 292-312; 292

<sup>375</sup> Richard Meyer, 'The Jesse Helms Theory of Art', *October*, Spring 2003, Issue 104: 131-148; 137

<sup>376</sup> Mayer, p.144

younger brother, and is seen holding a skull-mounted walking cane. A powerful visual commentary on the inevitability of death, and Mapplethorpe's 'owning' of his own situation in the way he grasps the skull, we see here a potent reminder of how Identity is constructed and defined as it is performed. For example, during the film we hear Mapplethorpe in a recorded interview say that his art and photographs are autobiographical in the way they represent what he was interested in at that particular time. Therefore, early in his career, nude Polaroid photos of him and Patti Smith perform his intense relationship with the punk musician and collages of gay porn magazine cut-outs perform a rethinking of his sexual identity.

Subject to much critical debate and existing alongside Mapplethorpe's photographs of sexual acts are his still life pieces of flowers. At first glance, they could be disregarded as entirely traditional and mundane; an attempt by Mapplethorpe to garner mainstream appeal and be accepted by the establishment. Equally, however, they can be understood as another aspect to the artist's sexual identity achieved through metaphor. Christopher Looby, for example, identifies a thematic link between Mapplethorpe's flower pieces and his fixation on photographing the black male body later in his career when he writes that, 'the black men are acknowledged to be rendered as exotic aesthetic objects, flowers of manhood, while the flowers are conceded to be signs of racial beauty, eroticized color (sic).' (Figure 7)<sup>377</sup>

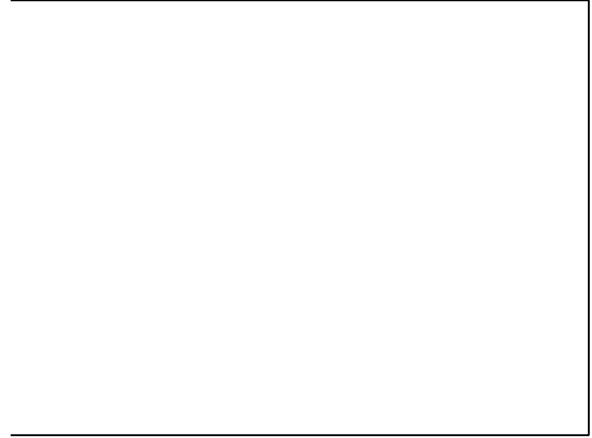


Figure 7: Flowers and the black male form in Mapplethorpe's photography.

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<sup>377</sup> Christopher Looby, 'Flowers of Manhood: Race, Sex and Floriculture from Thomas Wentworth Higginson to Robert Mapplethorpe', *Criticism*, Vol. 37 (1), 1/1/1995: 109-156; 140-141 <sup>379</sup> Looby, pp 141-142

Understandably, the emphasis placed on the objectifying of the black male form received much criticism. However, Looby continues, arguing that, 'Mapplethorpe in such photographs has *thematized* (sic) that very metonymy into the light of conscious scrutiny: made it available, by the theatricalizing (sic) practise of his stagy studio images, for critique and transformation.'<sup>379</sup> His staging of the portraits thus becomes, for Looby, a performative act which invites a 'to-be-looked-at-ness' but reflexively interrogates the thematic linking of black male body to exotic flora. In spite of how one feels about this justification of Mapplethorpe's subject choices – it is perhaps complicated by the fact that he was romantically involved with some of his black models – what becomes apparent is that his flower photographs can be interpreted as an extension of gay sexual identity.

Firstly, flowers contain the male and female sex organs of a plant. However, historically flowers have been central to symbolic representations of gay male identity, such as American and French literature ('Slaves on the Block' from Langston Hughes's *The Ways of White Folks* [1934], *Army Life in a Black Regiment* [1869] a memoir by Thomas Wentworth Higginson<sup>378</sup> and the work of Jean Genet including his fictionalised autobiography *The Thief's Journal* [1949] and also in film his film *Un Chant d'amour*<sup>379</sup>), as well as in painting, for example in the works of Caravaggio and Jean Broc's *The Death of Hyacinthos* (1801).<sup>380</sup> Furthermore, flora become part of a homophobic vocabulary. 'Flower', 'pansy', 'daffy' (a contraction of daffodil), and 'fruit' (the product of a plant) are just some of the derogatory labels given to gay men. Consequently, Mapplethorpe's flower still lifes stand as a more subtle, less visible, exploration of his gay 'self'.

How can the two documentaries themselves be defined as performative? In *I Am Divine*, this effect rests on Divine's most (in)famous association with John Waters on *Pink Flamingos*, namely where she eats dog faeces. Within the narrative frame of the documentary, the sequence is used as an example of Divine's styling as 'The Filthiest Person in the World'. However, within the Waters film, the sequence becomes a performative statement of Divine's own construction (and deconstruction) of gender boundaries which is enhanced by the allusion to the construction of the film itself.

The scene begins with the voiceover, 'Watch as Divine proves that not only is she the filthiest person in the world, she is also the filthiest actress in the world. What you are about to see is the real thing.' The narration, in its blurring of Divine's film character and role as actress, has the

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<sup>378</sup> Looby analyses these examples and others and relates discussion to Mapplethorpe's photographs.

<sup>379</sup> See Dyer's 'Shades of Genet' in *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp.63-108

<sup>380</sup> Peter Schultz, 'Robert Mapplethorpe's Flowers', *History of Photography*, Vol. 22 (1), 1998: 84-89; 88

effect of drawing the spectator's attention to the fact that they are watching a film and a shocking performance which is doubly transgressive both in its 'violation of food taboos but also in its violation of the line between the screen and the viewer'.<sup>381</sup> As we have already seen, the documentary also includes Camp performative sequences which reinforce visual style related to narrative content.

*Look at the Pictures* is similarly performative related to the process of photography. Firstly, directors Bailey and Barbato choose to include long takes of Mapplethorpe's work in static medium shot as if to mimic the viewing context of an art gallery. It is also a sardonic reply to Senator Helms's declaration shown in archive footage at the beginning of the film so that not only do we, as viewers, 'look at the pictures', with the help of the film, which contextualises the images within Mapplethorpe's life and work, we begin to understand their relevance in terms of LGBTQ+ identity. Examples where the documentary performs the act of viewing appear throughout. The section on the infamous 'X' portfolio of BDSM photos includes a bird's-eye framing of the album which is opened and leafed through by a pair of hands (presumably belonging to a curator). As each page is turned to reveal a new image there is a cut from medium close-up to close-up (CU). Editing and framing here appears to mirror a viewing spectator. The cut to a CU on the image represents the viewer's need to look closer at the image in order to decipher, perhaps, what it is that Mapplethorpe has inserted. The cut back to MCU figuring the spectator's shocked recoil on discovering that, yes, that is indeed a bullwhip. Later, at the end of the documentary, which focuses on the obscenity trial brought against the Washington gallery and its exhibition of 'The Perfect Moment', a title appears which reads, "The Perfect Moment" consisted of 175 images'. The film shows each of these photographs with an increased pace of cutting between them which is followed by another title: 'Only a handful were charged with obscenity'. At this point we are presented with each image. These examples, coupled with the often-explicit content of the images, begin to echo the provocative statement intended by the artist himself with the documentary viewer being placed in the position of a gallery spectator at the exhibit in 1989. Furthermore, there is a humorous moment near the beginning of the film as we see archivists preparing for a retrospective of Mapplethorpe's work. They are glancing through different pieces and come across Mapplethorpe posed with the whip at which point the film cuts to their awkward reactions thus demonstrating the role of the spectator when they are confronted with these images.

Later, as various talking heads are introduced reflecting on their memories and experiences with Mapplethorpe, the interviewees are filmed standing in different positions and places within the interview setting. The images dissolve from one to the next before the final image is shot from

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<sup>381</sup> Hallam, pp. 1-6

above through a camera's viewfinder. Another memorable example sees two models, one black and the other white, reunited in the film to recreate the famous photograph in which they appeared for Mapplethorpe. This technique serves to highlight the highly staged and intricate photographing process that Mapplethorpe developed. Moreover, in the context of a film which examines its subject's own negotiation of his identity, this performative formal device is a visual reminder of the constructed nature of all social identity.

But what are the effects created? Why is performance used in this way? As was mentioned previously, visibility has been an important issue for LGBTQ movements. Therefore, in documentaries such as these, we find display through performance. So, when Divine appears in outrageous costumes, wearing distinctive makeup and Mapplethorpe appears in his pictures participating in gay sex acts, they are, unashamedly, pronouncing their sexual identity through the very use of what Goffman describes as their 'stigma symbols'. It is worth highlighting that just because something or someone is visible within society does not ensure acceptance. Furthermore, not every LGBTQ+ individual is in a position to declare their identities in such a visible way for fear of persecution. What *I Am Divine* and *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* demonstrate then is a wider acknowledgment that LGBTQ+ identities exist and should be interpreted and engaged with as much as any other.

### 4.3 Gay Sensibility and Art Installation Films

As we have seen, LGBTQ+ documentary filmmakers can utilise various stylistic choices to provide visibility for their subjects and these usually necessitate performativity. I will now turn my attention towards film forms which blur notions of fiction film and documentary as well as challenging traditional ways of viewing, namely contemporary film art installations. My reasons for examining these films is so that the implications for LGBTQ+ subjectivity that this type of film exhibition raises can be explored. This conclusion is an extension of what Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs, referring to lesbian and gay documentaries, describe as seeing and speaking 'differently'.<sup>382</sup> In short, how do art film installations by LGBTQ+ filmmakers demonstrate a particular vision which is specific to LGBTQ+ experience?

Jack Babuscio's definition of what he terms the 'gay sensibility' is a useful starting point. He explains it as:

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<sup>382</sup> Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs, 'Introduction' in *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.2

[...] a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, directed and defined by the fact of one's gayness.<sup>383</sup>

Richard Dyer subsequently relates what a 'gay sensibility' might mean for the individual in everyday society in the way it stresses 'the absolute importance of mastering appearances and assuming identities in a gay life where passing for straight (assuming a straight appearance) is so critical.'<sup>384</sup> Evident here is the centrality of aesthetics, the 'look', as was previously mentioned, which appears in work by lesbian and gay documentarians starting in the 1950s and 1960s.

Similarly, Kathleen McHugh, referring to lesbian and gay experimental filmmakers, writes that '[q]ueer filmmakers perhaps have an edge in experimental, reflexive nonfiction because of their experience living in reflexive and rhetorical subjectivities.'<sup>385</sup> For contemporary LGBTQ+ film installation artists, such as Isaac Julien, Chantal Akerman and Noam Gonick, the emphasis placed on surface aesthetics and reflexivity is given an added dimension due to a different viewing context; the gallery offering a designated space which can lend itself to diverse spectator positions.

Much like its moving image progenitor, film-based art installation in museums and galleries initially struggled for legitimacy and to be given due critical attention. However, 'by the late twentieth century it emerged as a prominent and powerful creative force' and can be best understood as a meeting point of 'photographic-based celluloid technology' and later electronic, magnetic and digital developments in film recording and projection.<sup>386</sup> By design, moving image installations depend on a close relationship with the space in which they are viewed and aim 'to produce in spectators an expanded spatial awareness, a phenomenological sensitivity to all that is actual and present within a bounded space'<sup>387</sup>. On the surface, this combination of projected film within a concrete and visible location (in contrast to the darkened space of the cinema screen) could seem jarring. Catherine Elwes notes how, for the spectator, film and video's construction of images and sounds from another place and time threatens 'dulling their awareness of the here-

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<sup>383</sup> Jack Babuscio, 'Camp and the Gay Sensibility,' in *Gays and Him*, ed. Richard Dyer (London: BFI, 1977) p.40

<sup>384</sup> Dyer, p.118

<sup>385</sup> Kathleen McHugh, 'Irony and Dissembling: Queer Tactics for Experimental Documentary' in *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.224

<sup>386</sup> John G. Hanhardt, 'From Screen to Gallery: Cinema, Video, and Installation Art Practices', *American Art*, Vol. 22 (2), Summer 2008: 2-8; 2

<sup>387</sup> Catherine Elwes, 'Introduction' in *Installation and the Moving Image* (Columbia University Press, 2012), p.1

and-now'.<sup>388</sup> However, coupled with moving image exhibits' promotion of the space in which they occur, Elwes highlights that the characteristics of the art form, its location in public venues and the opportunities this presents for engagement and discussion, 'attract those with a political agenda'.<sup>389</sup> With this in mind, it is significant that the increased popularity and frequency of these types of installations occurred in line with technological shifts, which were, in turn, a reflection of wider societal and cultural changes. Therefore, rather than mourning the potential for distraction film screens represent, moving image installations can be interpreted as performative attempts to spatialise the fragmented relationship we have with contemporary image culture, full of smartphones and LED screens. Indeed, for Elwes, by 'staging what is familiar in an unexpected setting and offering up the uncanny for inspection in relative safety, moving image in the gallery holds the potential to recalibrate the terms of our engagement with our contemporary environment'.<sup>390</sup>

As we have already seen in this chapter, documentary representations of personal identity are, in many cases, distinctly political. And this is no different in moving art installations. Instead, the visible physical location where identity politics are shaped, debated and realised is more prominent. This space can be used by artists as an environment where the spectator can negotiate elements of their own identities and interact with traits that they perhaps would not otherwise encounter.<sup>391</sup> Depending on the nature of the exhibit, the gallery or museum can be transformed into a feminist, ethnic, or, in this case, queer space.

In Canadian artist Noam Gonick's work, *Wildflowers of Manitoba* (2007) (Figure 8, left), which was produced with Luis Jacobs, the filmmaker constructs what he calls a 'gay, noncapitalist, nonmonogamous hippie anarcho collective called the Radical Fairies' set in the 1960s.<sup>392</sup> The centrepiece of the exhibit consists of a six-minute looped film of the collective, which is viewed on different screens and projected onto a geometric dome scaffold within which one of the 'Radical Fairies' sits. Spectators are able to move around and view the exhibit from different perspectives. The effect of the set and visual images, for one reviewer, evokes a 'spirit of alternative collective lifestyles' which is utopian in its depiction of 'homosocial activity'.<sup>393</sup> The aestheticism of the piece is related to a conservationist, 'hippie' ideology which draws upon the costume and design of the 1960s and 1970s; the film is seemingly shot on super 8 film and the

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<sup>388</sup> Elwes, p.1

<sup>389</sup> Elwes, p.7

<sup>390</sup> Elwes, p.7

<sup>391</sup> Elwes, 'The Dialectics of Spectatorship', p.151

<sup>392</sup> Anonymous, 'Back to Nature's Future', *Border Crossings*, May 2007, Vol. 26, Issue 2, p14-15

<sup>393</sup> Anonymous, 'Noam Gonick and Luis Jacob: Wildflowers of Manitoba Film Installation (2007-12-15 - 200801-26)', *Absolutearts.com Art News*; 12/17/2007, p.1

actor plays with a Native American dreamcatcher. Furthermore, the dome has connotations of a greenhouse and could resemble a tepee or perhaps the Eden project structure in Devon.

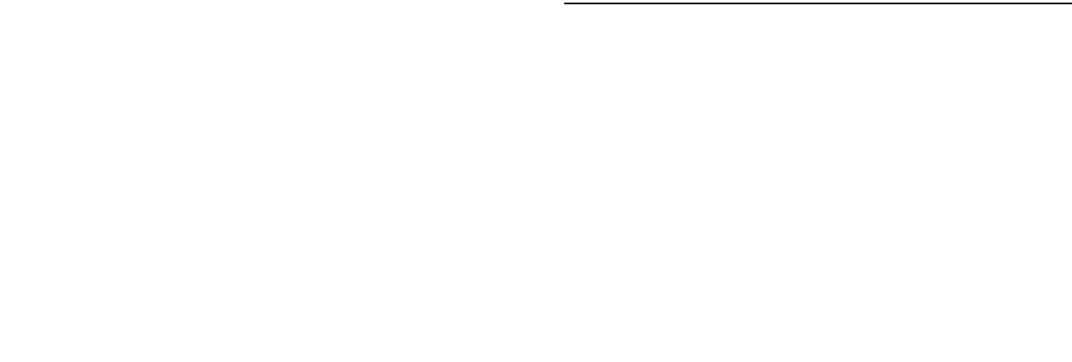


Figure 8: (left) Wildflowers of Manitoba (2007) by Noam Gonick and Luis Jacobs. (right) Chantal Akerman's Now (2015). Both examples of art installation films which depict queer ways of "seeing differently."

*Now* (2015) (Figure 8, right), the final exhibition by Belgian-born filmmaker Chantal Akerman following her death, includes examples of her varied work throughout her career. The central installation consists of five separate screens which depict different desert vistas as if filmed from a car window which move at various speeds. The spectator is able to travel from one screen to another, their visual experience connected by indistinct sounds of war – explosions, shouting, calls to prayer, distressed animals sounds – that play in the gallery space. The '[v]ariations of speed, stock and colour suggest vast worlds in themselves, and the trauma to eye and ear is overpowering, although not a single word is spoken'<sup>394</sup>, thus providing an affective experience for the viewer which privileges form over meaning.

Although Akerman's exhibit is not explicitly about LGBTQ+ experience as such (and she was often reluctant to have her work included in lesbian festivals), both her and Gonick and Jacobs' installations are designed first and foremost as aesthetic pieces. Viewed within an LGBTQ+ context, it can be said that their focus on appearance and surface demonstrate Babuscio's 'gay sensibility' and are performative of that subjectivity. Interpretation by the spectator is a central feature of moving image art installations with meaning often hard to pin down:

<sup>394</sup> Laura Cumming, 'Chantal Akerman NOW Review – Flickering Between Life and Death' <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/nov/08/chantal-akerman-now-review-ambika-p3-lifeand-death> - accessed 22/02/17

The meaning of a work is multiple and polymorphous and any instance of interpretation largely depends on who is doing the looking. The person engaged in active transaction with the work also brings to it her individual life history, her belief systems, political affiliations and her aspirations for the future, not to mention, as Viola reminded us, the kaleidoscope of memories of all the films, videos, television shows and installations she has ever seen.<sup>395</sup>

In this way, according to Bruce Brassell, LGBTQ+ filmmakers and audiences 'collaborate to produce a queer discourse, one which exists not only during the film viewing process, but which also circulates outside in the streets of the lesbian and gay community.'<sup>396</sup> These films, and many others, are 'queer' both in terms of their strangeness of form and in terms of the sensibility with which they have been made. It may be useful to consider these installations, the identities of the artist and the spectator through a Deleuzian prism of 'becoming': the exhibits themselves acquire meaning from who made them, where they are seen and through spectators' interpretation of them; the artistic process may lead the artist to gaining a more complete idea of their identity, in all its multi-faceted forms; and the spectator can both act on the exhibit (give it meaning) and be acted upon by it (through different physical senses) in a symbiotic process of 'being'. They therefore make visible, through a variety of formal and aesthetic strategies of 'looking', an LGBTQ+ experience which is both unique to its filmmaker, but which also represents and challenges the invisibility often felt by our community.

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<sup>395</sup> Elwes, p.153

<sup>396</sup> R. Bruce Brasell, "The Queer as Producer: Benjamin, Brecht, and The Making of 'Monsters,'" *Jump Cut*, 40 (1996), 47-54





## Chapter 5    Reflexive Strategies

In chapter 3, I introduced an analysis of the voice in two documentaries directed by Asif Kapadia. Within this discussion on how the images of Ayrton Senna and Amy Winehouse and the recorded voices of those closest to them interact in the construction of identity, I outlined Michel Chion's concept of the '*acousmêtre*' – that is, a voice which is heard but not visible onscreen.<sup>397</sup> In the case of Kapadia's films, the audiovisual style functions to imbue the interviewees' testimony with authority before revealing that, due to their voice being dislocated from a present physical body, their identity is incomplete. Paradoxically, it is arguable that the documentaries' most fully formed figures are Senna and Winehouse. In spite of both being deceased and unable to have a say in how their identities are represented, when they are seen in archival footage during the films, their bodies and voices are usually unified.

The first part of this chapter builds upon discursive approaches to the voice in documentary. It will compare the traditional types and effects of the 'voice' in nonfiction output with two recent biographical films – *The Arbor* (Clio Barnard, 2010) and *Notes on Blindness* (Peter Middleton & James Spinney, 2016) – which adopt a bold aesthetic and aural strategy of having actors lip-synch the words of the 'real' subjects they are performing. The effects created by such an approach will be investigated, where the manipulation of sound/voice and image/body reminds the spectator of the cinematic apparatus. *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) is another example where the documentary subject's body and voice are separated. However, in Folman's film, animation disrupts the representation of a complete identity. For a film about the 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the director's search to remember his part in the conflict, animation may sound like an unusual stylistic choice. However, due to animation's association with the fantasy genre, it is able to visualise 'more' than the historical world and represent internal subjective states and emotions. This, I argue, leads to a more comprehensive meditation on the process of memory and trauma in *Waltz with Bashir*.

### 5.1    Voice in Documentary

Unsurprisingly, the role 'voice' has played in documentary film has altered over time depending on the filmmaker's purpose when making their film. So, for example, the voice in a film like *Night*

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<sup>397</sup> Michel Chion, 'One: The Acousmêtre' in *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.21

*Mail* (Harry Watt & Basil Wright, 1936), which was commissioned by the General Post Office in Britain and made as part of John Grierson's vision of instilling in spectators a sense of social awareness, will be pitched differently to the didactic spoken commentary in the *Why We Fight* (1942-45) series which, among other things, sought to persuade an American public of the need to join the Second World War. Voice is different still in documentaries grouped under the direct cinema banner. For these films, made by Robert Drew and his associates that attempted to catch everyday life unawares, voice is overheard, not through narration, but from the individuals the film crew are following. And for documentaries made by 'star' directors – like Michael Moore, Errol Morris, Werner Herzog and Nick Broomfield – a strong authorial voice is employed, forming the film's main structural device.

To be clear, the 'voice' I am referring to here is that of human speech which can be extended to include vocal noises made by a person (shouts, laughs, sobs, etc.) and the auditory characteristics it has (tone, timbre, etc.). This contrasts with how Bill Nichols has defined 'voice' when writing about documentary as 'something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us', but not so specific as 'dialogue or spoken commentary'.<sup>398</sup> While Nichols' formulation of 'voice' may seem vague, he does provide a useful evaluation of a shift in documentary representation, writing as he is in the early 1980s. Referring to what he calls 'self-reflexive documentaries', which foreground the construction of the films themselves in their epistemological process, Nichols alludes to the increased significance of the film spectator when watching films like *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (Connie Field, 1980), *The Atomic Cafe* (Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty & Pierce Rafferty, 1982) and *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988), and the self-awareness they may experience:

Such films confront us with an alternative to our own hypotheses about what kind of things populate the world, what relations they sustain, and what meanings they bear for us. The film operates as an autonomous whole, as we do [...] The film is thus a simulacrum or external trace of the production of meaning we undertake ourselves every day, every moment. We see not an image of imaginary unchanging coherence, magically represented on a screen, but the evidence of an historically rooted act of making things meaningful comparable to our own historically situated acts of comprehension [...] This foregrounding of an active production of meaning by a textual system may also heighten our conscious sense of self as something also produced by codes that extend beyond ourselves.<sup>399</sup>

As such, the way these documentaries encourage a spectator to consider how the film texts are constructed can also be interpreted as an invitation to look inwards at their own identities and

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<sup>398</sup> Bill Nichols, 'The Voice of Documentary', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 36 (3), 1983: 17-30; 18

<sup>399</sup> Nichols, p.27

how they are consuming the film. This reflexivity is one example of the 'voice' as defined by Nichols. However, in its capacity to direct viewer attention and link to subjectivity, I will be examining the role human speech plays in documentaries that manipulate, problematise and reflect upon notions of voice and body as constitutive parts of, or sole purveyors for, a person's social identity.

Perhaps the most recognisable voice in documentary film is the 'voice-over', also referred to as 'voice-of-god' narration. It has gone in and out of fashion in non-fiction output over the years, with some filmmakers lauding or lamenting its capacity to direct spectator attention to the documentary's 'message' as a way of organising the film's images on the one hand, but potentially being too draconian in approach, leaving little room for the viewer to make up their own minds about the things they see and hear on the other. Critics have interpreted the voice-over as being imbued with authority and a certain omniscience due in part to its ability to guide and organise the images a spectator sees. Pascal Bonitzer includes voice-over as an example of the 'voice-off', which characterises those film voices we hear but cannot see. In this way, Bonitzer's concept overlaps with Chion's '*acousmêtre*'. However, whereas Chion mainly focuses on unseen voices in fiction films – film noir being a main exponent – Bonitzer applies this approach to documentary filmmaking. This type of voice-off establishes a space in/for the film, which is not part of the narrative space. So, in a detective noir story we can assume that the unseen voice is speaking from just beyond the frame, whereas commentary in a documentary occurs in a space without a direct spatial relationship to the images.<sup>400</sup>

Charles Wolfe, who provides an historical overview of voice-of-god narration in documentary film, also notes the spatial determinant in 'voice-over' and 'voice-off':

A key term in our contemporary critical vocabulary, 'voice-over' designates a *place* for vocal commentary by way of a metaphor that is at once spatial and hierarchical: voices are heard over...what? Over images, we may be tempted to say, but I think this is only partially right. As the felt need for a distinction between *voice-over* and *voice-off* makes plain, at issue here is not simply synchronisation (whether vocal utterances are matched to moving lips on the screen), nor a particular sensory dimension (audition versus vision), but rather our interpretation of the relationship of voices that we hear to a world that a documentary takes as its object of regard.<sup>401</sup>

Here, Wolfe is espousing the view that voice-over should not be considered on its own. The relation it has with the documentary images we see is most important and will help us decipher

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<sup>400</sup> Pascal Bonitzer, 'The Silences of the Voice', trans. Gudie Lawoetz, ed. Philip Rosen in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.323

<sup>401</sup> Charles Wolfe, 'Historicising the "Voice of God": The Place of Vocal Narration in Classical Documentary', *Film History*, Vol. 9 (2), 1997:149-167; 150

what the filmmaker and their film is ‘saying’ about the subject they are presenting. At the same time, the separation of voice from body a spectator encounters hearing the voice-over creates numerous effects.

The positioning of the voice commentary in such a space creates a sense of authority and power precisely because the speaker is not seen and therefore cannot be identified to be questioned.<sup>402</sup> For Mary Ann Doane, the voice-off’s power comes from the fact that it does not appear to have a body at all. That is the reason why the speaker is able to interpret the image; because the voice does not have a visible body, and it cannot be identified, it has no bias towards what is being represented.<sup>403</sup> One may then ask whether this split between an identifiable voice and body hinders a spectator’s understanding of the film. Doane comments on this, writing that the objective of classical filmmaking is to impart meaning and affect through the unity of body and voice, but the omniscient and ubiquitous qualities of the disembodied voice-over commentary soothes this potentially disturbing split because the spoken word ‘places the image by endowing it with a clear intelligibility’.<sup>404</sup>

Perhaps the divide between voice and body that the voice-over entails should not be read as that disconcerting after all. For, as Doane theorises, the cinematic apparatus does not represent a ‘real’ and ‘present’ body in the first place. Rather, a film shows us a ‘fantasmatic body’ that has been mechanically reproduced as a shadow on the screen.<sup>405</sup> Therefore, even if unity of voice and body is desired in the creation and communication of meaning and knowledge in film, the body and voice are but spectres; they are not ‘really there’. This self-reflexive interpretation of the film image and sound is heightened when types of voice-off are employed which risk ‘exposing the material heterogeneity of the cinema [...] As soon as the sound is detached from its source, no longer anchored by a represented body, its potential work as a signifier is revealed. There is always something uncanny about a voice which emanates from a source outside the frame’.<sup>406</sup>

*The Arbor* and *Notes on Blindness* are two such films which make this ‘material heterogeneity of the cinema’ abundantly clear. Both are biographical (and sometimes autobiographical) accounts which take recorded interview testimony as their starting points. However, in contrast to *Senna* and *Amy*, which presented this testimony alongside/over archive footage, these two documentaries have actors lip-synch the words of the people they are performing. The rest of this section will analyse the ramifications for the identities of the ‘real people’ speaking, the actors

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<sup>402</sup> Bonitzer, p.324

<sup>403</sup> Mary Ann Doane, ‘The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space’, *Yale French Studies*, 60 (1980): 33-50; 42

<sup>404</sup> Doane, p.47

<sup>405</sup> Doane, pp 33-34

<sup>406</sup> Doane, p.40

playing them and the spectator watching the film of using this idiosyncratic approach and will evaluate the documentaries' negotiation of voice and body in relation to the theories previously outlined.

## 5.2 *The Arbor*

*The Arbor*, by film artist and director Clio Barnard, takes as its subject the British playwright Andrea Dunbar. What emerges however is a shift in focus to her daughter Lorraine, whose troubled childhood and adolescence begins to mirror that of her mother's. Dunbar rose to prominence in 1977 when, at the age of fifteen, her stage play *The Arbor*, which she had written for a classroom assignment, was noticed by Royal Court Theatre director Max Stafford-Clark. The title of the play, first performed in 1980, comes from the council estate Dunbar grew up on – Brafferton Arbor – and its plot draws extensively on her life experiences. The success of the first play led to Dunbar being commissioned to write the follow-up, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, which was subsequently adapted into the 1987 feature film directed by Alan Clarke. Dunbar had three children by three different men and, according to Lorraine and others who knew her, had an alcohol problem. She died in 1990 at the age of 29 from a brain haemorrhage.

The documentary indicates that Andrea's daughter, Lorraine, harbours a deep resentment towards her mother (in contrast to her younger sister Lisa). Lorraine felt isolated growing up as the only British-Pakistani on the estate during a time of increased far-right nationalism and claims to have heard her mother say that she could not love her the same as her other children because of this. After her mother's death, Lorraine turned to drugs and prostitution, and entered into numerous abusive relationships, moving from different women's shelters before ending up in prison for causing the death of her son who overdosed on methadone. Lorraine's testimony in the film reveals her frustration at not being able to speak about how she felt towards her mother, saying at one stage that she never asked to be born. Barnard's film addresses issues of the inability to communicate, a type of familial speech impediment, through the formal strategy of having actors lip-synch the recorded interviews of Lorraine, her siblings and other friends and family.

There are three examples of how voice functions in *The Arbor*. The first, making up most of the film, is this lip-synching. Barnard conducted interviews with key people in Andrea's life and recorded their testimony. These voices are neither definitive examples of 'voice-off' according to Bonitzer's definition, nor voiceover in that their speaker's bodies are interpreted onscreen by actors. The second example is evident in the various scenes taken from Dunbar's play 'The Arbor',

which is being staged on and around the eponymous estate for the film. Here, the actors' voices are their own and are unified with their bodies. We can describe these as 'diegetic voices' as they are a part of the world constructed by the film. Finally, we see and hear Andrea in television documentaries produced near the start and end of her life. BBC's *Arena* (1980) and Yorkshire TV's *The Great North Show* (1989) offer profiles of the writer and interview her as she reflects on her work.<sup>407</sup> The voices that we hear were recorded for a different text and have been reproduced in Barnard's documentary, so we can categorise these as 'archival voices'. It is already clear that *The Arbor* operates based on multiple interrelated vocal, temporal and spatial layers where the voices and sounds we hear have been recorded at different times and places in relation to the film text itself. As we shall see later, parallels are to be found in the various performances Barnard orchestrates, which have profound implications for how spectators think about identity. For now, I will analyse the different affects that are created using these heterogeneous vocal examples.

Echoing the work of Doane, Barnard has stated that she used the lip-synching technique as a way to draw attention to and widen the gap between reality and representation.<sup>408</sup> As such, it clearly signals to the spectator that the documentary they are watching is a construction. Barnard and her actors work hard to make the separated image and vocal track appear synchronous by attempting to match every pause and stutter on the recordings. However, Barnard clearly does not want to 'dupe' audiences into misperception because she begins her film with the disclaimer, 'This is a true story, filmed with actors lip-synching to the voices of the people whose story it tells'. Therefore, in contrast to Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* discussed in chapter two, *The Arbor* discloses its intentions and thus encourages the spectator to consider in what ways this unusual technique informs their understanding of the documentary from the very beginning.

However, this is not solely used as a way to deconstruct the assumed objectivity of documentary. By deciding to use lip-synching, it could be said that Barnard has created a space of reflection for the film spectator. It has a distancing effect that means we pay more attention to what is being said. However, in contrast to German playwright Bertolt Brecht's ideas about creating alienation in an audience, the solemn interpretation by actors of Lorraine's experiences filmed in static shots with proscenium framing 'paradoxically intensifies the often horrific content'.<sup>409</sup>

The fact remains, though, that an individual (actor in this case) who has not experienced the events they mime visually achieves this emotional intensity. As a result, Barnard is drawing attention to the performative nature of everyday social identity. In the film world she creates, the

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<sup>407</sup> Michael Brooke, 'The Arbor', *Sight & Sound*, XX (11), Nov 2010, 51-52

<sup>408</sup> Clio Barnard interviewed by Nick James, 'Clio, Andrea and Lorraine Too', *Sight & Sound*, XX, 11, Nov 2010, 25-26

<sup>409</sup> Brooke, 51-52

identity of a person consists of a body and a voice that are not connected. Barnard's technique is an extreme form of verbatim theatre where the actors do not merely form an impression of the speaker's voice; the voice becomes contained within their bodies.

For some critics, such as Lib Taylor, Barnard's technique creates an audio-visual hierarchy in which 'The voice is the real, while the body (to differing degrees) is a performed and constructed assemblage'.<sup>410</sup> I would argue, however, that this 'other' body highlights the uncertainty of a unified identity in the film. Both representations (or manifestations) of the 'real' people in *The Arbor*, the spoken testimony and the actors' performances, are 'missing' something. The interviewees lack their own physical bodies and the performers do not have a voice. Taylor's formulation seems to assume that the voice in *The Arbor* is a type of voiceover and aligns with Doane's definition that it is imbued with authority because we cannot see the speaker's body. Instead, we see a performed manifestation of the speaker's body and watch as their voice is consolidated (projected onto) by the performer's lip-synching. Far from the 'oneness' that Doane suggests is the aim of classical narrative filmmaking, *The Arbor*'s complex vocal layers demonstrate that identity is fragmented and offers a causal link to the difficulty of describing some of the traumatic events in the 'real' people's lives.<sup>411</sup> At one point, Lorraine reflects on her time living as a prostitute to help fund her drug addiction. She explains that some of the women she knew hanged themselves before stopping and saying, 'I don't really want to talk about it'. Due to her words being mimed by actress Manjinder Virk, the film seems to be saying that Lorraine is *unable* to talk about it.

Existing alongside the vocal layers, various types of performance inflect Barnard's film and further blur the line between reality and representation. They can be summarised as follows. Firstly, there are the recorded vocal performances by the family and friends of Andrea Dunbar. Actors then visually perform these. Dramatic reconstructions represent some of the events mentioned in the interviews, such as a scene in which Lorraine as a young girl is seen dancing in a sari on top of her father's car and when Lorraine and Lisa recall how their bed caught fire when they were younger. Interspersed within the documentary are scenes taken from Dunbar's play, 'The Arbor', which are staged by actors on the estate. Archive footage from television documentaries on Dunbar, news footage reporting on Lorraine's arrest, and scenes from Clarke's film version of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* provide additional context and exposition into some of the events mentioned.

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<sup>410</sup> Lib Taylor, 'Voice, Body and the Transmission of the Real in Documentary Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 23 (3), August (2013), pp. 368-379

<sup>411</sup> Doane, p.47

Finally, Barnard includes contemporary film of the estate itself including opening and closing shots depicting the residents' day-to-day life on Brafferton Arbor.<sup>412</sup>

Dunbar's work was sometimes autobiographical, sometimes based on things she saw or heard growing up on the estate. Already evident here then is the relationship between art and reality, which Barnard recreates through her film's form. For Cecilia Mello, 'intermediality' – the connections between texts from film, television and theatre – is crucial to understanding how Barnard interrogates this relationship.<sup>413</sup> Unsurprisingly, in *The Arbor*, the theatre is the location where art and reality meet head-on. In one of the most striking sequences in the film, Lorraine as an adult 'meets' her mother and is given the opportunity to symbolically address the issues that she has not been able to tell Andrea, and Barnard organises a variety of texts from different media to do this. Lorraine reads her closing remarks from the play 'A State Affair', which was commissioned by theatre director Max Stafford Clark and written by Robin Soans in 2000. Her coda offers a scathing summary of Andrea and the Brafferton Arbor estate. In addition to the lines being performed by Virk-as-Lorraine, Barnard includes shot-reverse-shots to Andrea sat in the audience smoking. Her image has been lifted from one of the television documentaries, so there is a slight disjoint between the transitions from different media. If that was not enough, Barnard then cuts to the actors who have portrayed other relatives and close friends throughout the film also watching from the stalls. They react to Lorraine's comments and, lip-synching to their real counterpart's words, criticise Andrea's daughter's negative representation of her mother. This results in a choral effect that collapses space (the interviews were recorded separately) and time (Andrea had been dead for many years when Lorraine wrote the coda to 'A State Affair') and collects a variety of intertextual performances onto a literal and filmic stage.

Another consistent motif in the film is the doubling of performances with people watching versions of themselves as a role, which points towards a comparison with Sigmund Freud's theorisation of the 'uncanny'.<sup>414</sup> In fact, numerous critics have casually mentioned *The Arbor*'s style as such when writing about the film, and I think this is worthy of further analysis, especially interpreting how Freud's term relates to identity.<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> Summarised from Cecilia Mello, 'Art and Reality in *The Arbor* (2010)' in *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, Vol. 12 (1), 2016: 115-128; 119

<sup>413</sup> Mello, p.118

<sup>414</sup> Brooke, 51-52

<sup>415</sup> Including: Ben Walters, 'Talking Cure', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. LXIV (4), Summer (2011), pp. 6-7 and Mary Ann Doane 'The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space', *Yale French Studies*, 60 (1980), p.40 when writing about the effects of voice-off and voiceover.

Freud's use of the term stems from the German word *unheimlich*, which is the negative of *heimlich* meaning 'homely'.<sup>416</sup> Therefore, Freud concludes 'that what is "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar'.<sup>417</sup> By drawing upon other critical theorists, Freud then proceeds to outline features of the uncanny and how it can be applied to psychoanalysis, one of which holds special relevance to Barnard's lip-synching technique used in *The Arbor*. Mentioning examples like epileptic fits and psychotic episodes, Freud explains that any processes that create an 'impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity' are uncanny.<sup>418</sup> In other words, anything that reveals, disrupts, or complicates everyday reality can be the source of the uncanny; the 'mechanical process' here being the cinematic apparatus and a deliberate separation of the image and soundtrack.

Indeed, as Freud goes on to explicitly state, 'an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced'.<sup>419</sup> As we have already seen, *The Arbor* itself references Dunbar's writing process where reality influences her narratives and so Barnard's editing style suggests that events in the playwright's life, themselves interpreted and performed in the production of the play during the film, come to influence Lorraine's troubled adolescence. A scene from 'The Arbor' sees the 'Girl' (a version of Andrea) on a bus talking with a friend when the conductor arrives and asks the Girl to pay the fare. She requests a child's ticket, but he says that she does not look young enough. The Girl replies that she is 'nearly fifteen'. Barnard then cuts to Lorraine who reveals that aged fourteen or fifteen she was raped and began taking drugs. Later, Lorraine reads an excerpt from the play where Yousef beats the Girl. This mirrors Lorraine's own experience of her abusive relationship where she was falsely imprisoned. What emerges is the sense that Lorraine's downward spiral is a cruel twist of fate, and a disturbing case of life imitating art where such a distinction is already blurred.

Another of Freud's features of the uncanny is 'doubling' and the figure of the *doppelgänger* that appear throughout *The Arbor*. However, not only are they present in the actors who perform the words of the speakers off-screen, they also appear during the performances of scenes from Dunbar's play on the estate. As a result, we experience the disorientating effect of seeing actors who are playing Andrea's siblings, miming the words spoken by their 'real' counterparts, watching actors performing parts from 'The Arbor' who are themselves versions of Dunbar's real family. This is then happening on the actual estate on which the events from the play occurred, being watched by contemporary residents. If this was not enough, extra-textual elements intrude

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<sup>416</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919) from *Art and Literature*, (Pelican Freud 14, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.341

<sup>417</sup> Freud, p.341

<sup>418</sup> Freud, p.347

<sup>419</sup> Freud, p.367

in the casting of Jimmy who was Andrea's partner. In the film, George Costigan, who played Bob in *Rita, Sue, and Bob Too* performs his testimony, which again reminds the spectator of the slippery line between reality and intermediality.

Freud reflects on the double from ancient Egyptian cultures in which icons that represented the deceased were laid beside the sarcophaguses in order to protect 'against the destruction of the ego'.<sup>420</sup> For S.S. Prawer, 'the *Doppelgänger* represents, in the first instance, the hidden part of our self, whether super-ego [...] or id [...]'; but it also revives primitive beliefs in the independent, almost bodily, existence of our soul, mirror and puppet magic, demons or gods that amuse themselves by taking on our shapes'.<sup>421</sup> However, when such beliefs in the double are revealed to be false, a feeling of the uncanny takes over. Barnard's film introduces doubles of individuals within an intertextual diegetic world, not as a safeguard from symbolic or actual death, but to demonstrate that theatrical performance and social performance are closely connected and, sometimes, indistinguishable.

As previously mentioned, Freud is writing from a psychoanalytic perspective and applies the uncanny to his work on mental neuroses. However, *The Arbor*'s most distinctive formal technique, the lip-synching, can be interpreted as the performative materialisation of a speech impediment or disorder due to the fact that the 'real' speakers have their words separated from their corporeal bodies and put into the mouths of another. In its most general form, 'speech disorder' refers to a condition where an individual struggles or is unable to produce speech sounds. They can be caused by a range of factors, such as 'hearing loss, neurological disorders, brain injury, mental retardation, drug abuse, physical impairments such as cleft lip and palate, and vocal abuse or misuse'.<sup>422</sup>

Related to critical literature on clinical linguistics, the 'talking heads' in Barnard's film resemble aphasia sufferers, that is, individuals who struggle to produce speech, often resulting from brain trauma.<sup>423</sup> Although not accurate in all of the speakers' cases, the fact that Andrea died of a brain haemorrhage and Lorraine' drug abuse would have physically altered her mental state, allows us to analyse the documentary's style as a reflection of these characters and the others that populate *The Arbor* and their inability to be seen to speak about the events. The disjunct between spoken testimony and the film image represents a 'phonological markedness', understood as the

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<sup>420</sup> Freud, pp 356-357

<sup>421</sup> S.S. Prawer, 'The Uncanny' from *Caligari's Children: The Film as Tale of Terror*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), pp 118-119

<sup>422</sup> Alan E. Harrison (ed.),'Preface' in *Speech Disorders: Causes, Treatment and Social Effects* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2010), p.vii

<sup>423</sup> Susan Edwards, 'Grammar and Fluent Aphasia', in Elisabetta Fava (ed.), *Clinical Linguistics: Theory and Applications in Speech Pathology and Therapy* (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Publishers, 2002), p.249

noticeable trace of an individual's speech disorder.<sup>424</sup> 'Markedness' recalls the work on stigma symbols by Erving Goffman in the previous chapter. However, instead of visible difference, verbal difference identifies the sufferer as 'other'. Social responses to speech impairments can vary, yet according to some surveys certain people will automatically assume that the sufferer is psychologically disturbed and/or lacking intelligence.<sup>425</sup> Judgments such as these often result in the sufferer withdrawing from social interactions in order to limit stigmatisation. It is telling, therefore, that in Lorraine's case, as documented and dramatized in *The Arbor*, her social isolation (movement between different domestic abuse shelters and prison time) is reinforced by the actress-as-Lorraine's appearance alone in re-enactments and the empty echo of the words she mimes.

Additionally, if film can be considered a language – as Christian Metz<sup>426</sup> and other critics writing from the 1960s and later debated – then *The Arbor* as a documentary film text represents an attempt to push this performativity of speech impairment even further. Citing Metz's theory, Robert Stam summarises that:

Literary language, for example, is the set of messages whose matter of expression is writing; cinematic language is the set of messages whose matter of expression consists of five tracks or channels: moving photographic image, recorded phonetic sound, recorded noises, recorded musical sound, and writing (credits, intertitles, written materials in the shot). Cinema is a language, in sum, not only in a broadly metaphorical sense but also as a set of messages grounded in a given matter of expression, and as an artistic language, a discourse or signifying practice characterized by specific codifications and ordering procedures.<sup>427</sup>

Barnard's film disrupts these ordering procedures by splitting the image and audio tracks. As a result, *The Arbor*'s formal strategy not only performs speech disorder to reflect the traumatic experiences of the 'characters' in the 'narrative'. It also disrupts the very language of film to demonstrate the difficulty of bringing these harrowing life stories into being.

Freud mentions that 'the compulsion to repeat' is another element of the uncanny, which relates to medical understandings of trauma. Given that the life stories that people in *The Arbor*, especially Lorraine, recount are often deeply disturbing (the spoken testimonies themselves being

<sup>424</sup> Dirk-Bart Den Ouden, 'Segmental vs Syllable Markedness Deletion Errors in the Paraphasias of Fluent and Non-Fluent Aphasics' in Elisabetta Fava (ed.), *Clinical Linguistics: Theory and Applications in Speech Pathology and Therapy* (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Publishers, 2002), p.25

<sup>425</sup> L. Bebout & B. Arthur, 'Attitudes Toward Speech Disorders: Sampling the Views of Cantonese-Speaking Americans', *Journal of Communication Disorders*, May 1997, 30(3): 205-229; 205

<sup>426</sup> Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. by Michael Taylor (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1974)

<sup>427</sup> Robert Stam, 'The Question of Film Language' in *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, c2000 [2007 printing]), p.112

examples of repetition), Barnard's film arguably sets up a therapeutic framework where the people involved are kept at a critical distance from spectators and the events they recount. Their on-screen surrogates safeguard them against adverse effects related to the 'return of the repressed'. In doing so, Barnard also emphasises through uncanny distancing devices that identity in her film and everyday events are unfamiliar and unstable.

### 5.3 *Notes on Blindness*<sup>428</sup>

BAFTA-nominated documentary *Notes on Blindness* (Peter Middleton & James Spinney, 2016) is another example of the performative representation of disability – blindness – and recounts the story of writer and theologian John M. Hull who, in 1983, just days before the birth of his first son, went blind. In an attempt to understand his condition, the university professor began recording audiotapes of his feelings and experiences living with blindness. These cassettes formed the basis of Hull's autobiographical work *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness* published in 1990.

In a vein similar to Barnard, directors Middleton and Spinney chose to use these tapes, and additional interviews with Hull and his wife Marilyn, by having actors lip-synch their testimony. Hull, Marilyn, the other individuals we hear – the 'real' people – are absent from the documentary's images (apart from a coda which shows Hull and Marilyn standing together, gazing out to sea) and only heard on the soundtrack. However, rather than the multiple layers of performance that *The Arbor* organises in order to comment on the performative nature of everyday social identity, the focus in *Notes on Blindness* seems to be the construction of a viewing experience that is performative of blindness itself. Once again, the key to this effect is the relationship of voice to image.

Where, when and what, then, is the voice in *Notes on Blindness*? On the one hand, John Hull's voice (and that of the others we hear throughout the film) is a form of voice-over. For the most part, we hear his voice but cannot identify his body. It is somewhere and 'somewhen' else to the images onscreen. One might assume therefore that his commentary has a certain amount of power. However, Hull's words are sutured to a different body in the film through an actor's lip-synching. Consequently, and contrary to the desire for unity of voice/body/space, identity is split between the voice which has no body (Hull) and the body which cannot speak (the actor).

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<sup>428</sup> This section builds upon and extends my article, 'Mute Bodies, Disembodied Voices and Blind Spectators: Performativity in *Notes on Blindness*' in *Question Journal*, April 23 (2018), <https://www.questionjournal.com/single-post/2018/04/23/Mute-Bodies-Disembodied-Voicesand-Blind-Spectators-Performativity-in-Notes-on-Blindness> - accessed 21/09/18

Similarly to *The Arbor*, even if this attempt at synchronisation was perfectly realised such that a spectator was unable to tell the difference between the two, the documentary signposts the lip-synching technique at the beginning. As a result, the directors are drawing attention to the fact that the audience is watching a construction where the soundtrack and images have been manipulated.

One might then ask; why adopt such an approach to representing this story? I contend that the first reason is to reflect Hull's response to his affliction, which, according to the documentary, is complex. Through Hull's testimony, and interpreted by the actors onscreen, the writer's dreams provide his only opportunity to see and they reveal his relationship with blindness. One such dream sees Hull and his family shopping in a supermarket when suddenly a violent surge of water crashes through the aisles. Reminiscent of a similar image from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), the surreal sequence represents Hull's all-encompassing fear of his condition and the consequences it will have for him and his family. Another dream sequence shows Hull walking through his house into a workshop where he sees his son for the first time. On the soundtrack, Hull exclaims that it is a miracle that his sight has started to come back before he realises that it was just a dream. At once frustrated and depressed, then hopeful and philosophical, it is clear from these scenes that Hull's blindness has a profound effect on his sense of identity, fragmenting it into various pieces as he attempts to compartmentalise what his disability means for different aspects of his life. The disjunction of voice and body thus serves to visually and aurally reproduce this fragmented sense of self.

Furthermore, the film begins to 'perform' the sensory effects of blindness for an able-sighted spectator. The spectator's identification is clearly aligning with Hull as a person and character in the film. Hull's visit to the doctor after complaining about losing his sight includes first-person camera shots of the actor-as-Hull receiving medical treatment. The image then blurs before fading to black, which visually represents Hull's (and our) loss of sight. Consequently, the spectator is visually placed in Hull's position with the camera performing the role of his eyes. With this now in place, it would be logical to assume that the rest of the film would consist of a darkened screen that implements visual representations of Hull's description of his blindness, be that certain colours or indistinct shapes appearing, combined with the dream sequences. This would be similar to Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), which reflected on the director's experiences with AIDS. However, it is arguable that this technique might prove off-putting for the film's audience. Therefore, the directors proceed by using images and identification with Hull and his family by only including clear shots of the faces of the actors of John and his family with other individuals seen with heads cut off by the frame or obscured in other ways. However, by combining this visual strategy with lip-synching, the film begins to construct a more multi-layered

experience of what, somewhat paradoxically, blindness looks and sounds like. Central to this are theories surrounding the normative and disabled gaze.

Johnson Cheu, in his essay 'Seeing Blindness On-Screen', summarises some of the prevailing assumptions about film blindness. These include the co-optation of the blind characters' disabled gaze by the normative characters' gaze.<sup>429</sup> Filmmakers will often represent this through darkening the screen or blurring the image in order to appropriate the blind gaze and reinforce the able-bodied characters and spectators' 'sense of dominance'.<sup>430</sup> For Cheu, such an approach results in the creation of stereotypes around blindness, including dependency, infantilisation and isolation, which threaten to obliterate the subjectivity of these individuals.<sup>431</sup>

Alenka Zupančič proposes a reversal of this able-bodied/disabled, dominant/submissive binary by citing René Descartes:

For Descartes, the 'blind man' does not function as the opposite of those who see. As a (blind) *man* he perceives in his own way everything that others do [...]. Descartes's point is not simply that the blind, in some way, 'see' as we do [...] It is not the blind who are compared to 'us' (who see), it is 'we' who have to be compared to the blind in order to be able to understand what happens when we see.<sup>432</sup>

*Notes on Blindness* attempts to put this strategy in place for the able-sighted spectator. The different identities of voice and body, separated through the lip-synching device, reflexively visualise the experience a blind person would have on hearing someone speaking. In other words, they would not be able to discern what that person looked like. So, the spectator watching *Notes on Blindness* sees a person's image, but the voice belongs to someone else. This recreates, in visual terms, the disjunction of identity a blind person hears.

Some critical reviews of the film expand upon the impact for the documentary's spectator. Charlie Phillips writes in *The Guardian* that 'the genius of the film is in allowing us to understand and visualise the world of blindness without having to be patronised'.<sup>433</sup> And Tim Robey relates the documentary's use of actors to a blind person's sense of their own subjectivity when he writes, '[s]ince this is not actually John, it puts us in mind of a blind person imperfectly imagining

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<sup>429</sup> Johnson Cheu, 'Seeing Blindness On-Screen: The Blind, Female Gaze' in Nicole Markotic & Sally Chivers (eds.), *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability Onscreen* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), p.71

<sup>430</sup> Cheu, p.71

<sup>431</sup> Cheu, p.70

<sup>432</sup> Alenka Zupančič, 'Philosopher, Blind Man's Bluff' in Renata Saleci and Slavoj Žižek (eds.) *The Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) pp32-33

<sup>433</sup> Charlie Phillips, '*Notes on Blindness* (Review)

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jun/15/notes-on-blindness-review-beautiful-accessiblethoughtful-one-off> - accessed 12/11/17

the impression they might be making on the world'.<sup>434</sup> Indeed, the film's attempts to perform the experience of blindness took advantage of developing virtual reality (VR) technologies. Alongside its theatrical run, *Notes on Blindness – Into Darkness* was shown at some cinemas and included an interactive VR experience inspired by Hull's audiocassettes. Prompted by Hull's testimony, the viewer is able to 'see' from a blind person's perspective. Ghostly, translucent figures appear and disappear during a trip to the local park and a room is given shape by rainfall, a recording from Hull's sonic diary that is recreated in an extraordinary sequence in the documentary. *Notes on Blindness* and the accompanying VR experience attempt to enact blindness for the film's spectator and to create the feelings associated with it. As such, the film is very different to other documentary treatments of sight loss. For example, *Land of Silence and Darkness* (Werner Herzog, 1971) recounts the work of Fini Straubinger who has been deaf and blind since adolescence. She organises meetings and day trips with other individuals living with sight and hearing loss, with Herzog's camera observing events from a critical distance. The result is a deeply empathetic film that documents the daily challenges of being blind and deaf but that does not provide or perform the experience for the viewer.

This reflexive address through performative techniques is an invitation from the filmmakers for the spectator to consider their own identities which, in this case (and somewhat paradoxically), involves them experiencing blindness through seeing and hearing. In this way, *Notes on Blindness* owes a stylistic debt to the verbatim theatre technique of *The Arbor*. As well as creating a complex palimpsest of different performances, *The Arbor* complicates notions of unified identity and documentary's link to the 'real world'. For both films, this stylistic choice results in deeply affecting and complex viewings that interrogate human perception and preconceptions of voice and image in documentary.

## 5.4 Animation in *Waltz with Bashir*

Animation is another visual form that provides a dislocation between the visual and aural tracks of film. Furthermore, it offers a radical challenge to the objective debates surrounding documentary studies when used within the nonfiction film form due to its popular associations with fantasy and the children's film. However, as I will develop in this section on the film *Waltz with Bashir*, animated documentaries are sometimes ideally suited to representing complex subjective experiences that live action documentary would struggle to convey.

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<sup>434</sup> Tim Robey, 'Notes on Blindness is one of the most eye-opening documentaries you'll see all year – review' <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/06/30/notes-on-blindness-is-one-of-the-most-eye-opening-documentaries/> - accessed 12/11/17

According to Paul Ward, animated documentaries are ‘inherently reflexive’.<sup>435</sup> Animation highlights the intrusive role of the animator, which is even more pronounced than the comparative director of live-action documentary, due to the individual creating/drawing each film frame. Combining the constructed features of animation with the documentary form’s claim to the historical world emphasises the constructed nature of this world. The implication here is that conventional documentary might not be the best or only way to depict subjects or ‘real’ world events. Annabelle Honess Roe proposes three functions animation performs in documentaries and these can explain why a documentary filmmaker would choose to use animation in the first place. These are mimetic substitution, non-mimetic substitution and evocation.<sup>436</sup>

‘Mimetic substitution’ describes animation that stands in for footage that would have been difficult or impossible to film for the documentary. In this way, animation used for this purpose is similar to reconstructions in live-action documentaries. ‘Non-mimetic substitution’ is animation whose purpose is not to recreate any real-world referent. On the contrary, these films or scenes ‘work towards embracing and acknowledging animation as a medium in its own right, a medium that has the potential to express meaning through its aesthetic realisation’.<sup>437</sup> Finally, ‘evocation’ explains animation that attempts to visualise difficult sensory or emotional states. A recent example of this form of animation is *Life, Animated* (Roger Ross Williams, 2016) about Owen Suskind who, at age 3, developed autism. As a way of understanding the world and communicating with his family, Owen begins to use his favourite Disney characters as a language. Throughout the film, animated sequences inspired by Owen’s own drawings evoke the feelings and responses he has to events in his life.

A further three effects of using animation in a documentary film can be summarised using the above functions. Firstly, through its ability to communicate interior and subjective states, animation allows a documentary spectator ‘to imagine the world from someone else’s perspective’.<sup>438</sup> Additionally, animated documentaries are able to represent and reflect upon past memories and introduce the feelings associated with them by commenting on the animated image and memory’s ‘ambiguous relationship with reality’.<sup>439</sup> These features, when introduced into an autobiographical documentary context, can have a direct impact upon how an individual makes sense of their identity. As Roe explains:

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<sup>435</sup> Paul Ward, ‘Animation and Documentary Representation’ in *Documentary: The Margins of Reality* (London: Wallflower, 2005), pp 88-89

<sup>436</sup> Annabelle Honess Roe, ‘Representational Strategies’ in *Animated Documentary* (Hounds mills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp 22-23

<sup>437</sup> Roe, p.24

<sup>438</sup> Roe, p.25

<sup>439</sup> Annabelle Honess Roe, ‘Animated Memories’ in *Animated Documentary* (Hounds mills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.143

Animation can also, through its nature as a medium that can be realised in multiple formats, techniques and styles, convey questions regarding forgetting and remembering, knowing and not knowing, the past. Animation, by nature of its construction and creation, can present a subjective intervention into the discourses of autobiography, memory and history. In this way, animation as strategy for the re-presentation of personal history is a tool by which self-identity can be explored and understood [...] By telling stories of our past, and memorialising personal history, we can come to better understand and know ourselves.<sup>440</sup>

Because of its drawn or created nature, and having a loose link to the pro-filmic or 'real' world event it depicts, the animated image is performative of the memory process, in danger of disappearing from the individual's view.

A second effect created by the use of animation in documentary is to demonstrate the former's ability to represent 'more' than the physical referent of the latter.<sup>441</sup> However, this 'excess' is coupled with an 'absence'. So, 'the expected indexical imagery of documentary is absent, and in its place is animation, which can take multiple different forms, all with a materiality, aesthetics, and style that goes above and beyond merely "transcribing" reality.'<sup>442</sup> It is in this fragile ontological status of the animated image – this encounter between absence and excess – that an animated documentary's meaning can be found.

This absence and excess are apparent when instead of the physical appearance of an individual, we see their animated equivalent. The tension created between hearing the unaltered speech coming from the animated body leads to the third and final effect I will be discussing: a greater emphasis placed on the documentary soundtrack.<sup>443</sup> These instances call attention to the debate in documentary of which has primacy in the construction of meaning; the image or a person's speech. Roe, by referencing the work of Steven Connor, explains how his theory of the 'vocalic body' can help the spectator to understand how this relationship is working in animated nonfiction. For Connor, the vocalic body is, '[T]he idea – which can take the form of a dream, fantasy, ideal, theological doctrine, or hallucination – of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained by the autonomous operations of the voice'.<sup>444</sup> Roe expands:

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<sup>440</sup> Roe, p.146

<sup>441</sup> Ward, pp 88-89

<sup>442</sup> Annabelle Honess Roe, 'Introduction' in *Animated Documentary* (Hounds Mills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.14

<sup>443</sup> Roe, p.2

<sup>444</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.35, cited in Annabelle Honess Roe, 'Animated Interviews' in *Animated Documentary* (Hounds Mills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.78 <sup>447</sup> Roe, p.78

We can think of the animated embodiments of interview subjects as vocalic bodies, ones that emphasise the autonomy of the voice as expressive and meaningful in its own right at the same time as adding a dimension of interpretation, and sometimes juxtaposition, to what is heard. For while animated bodies may seem to astutely 'match' the voice of the speaker, they are also fundamentally a mismatch by virtue of not being the body of the speaker.<sup>447</sup>

It is possible here to identify a resemblance of the vocalic body in animation to the lip-synching technique used in *The Arbor* and *Notes on Blindness* in that both seem to perform a visual metaphor for the multi-faceted nature of identity centred on the complex interaction between sound and image, voice and body. The remainder of this chapter will apply these three effects of using animation in documentary – subjectivity and memory, 'absence and excess', emphasis on the soundtrack – to the autobiographical animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir*.

*Waltz with Bashir* documents the attempt by director Ari Folman to remember and reconcile his experiences as part of the Israeli army during the First Lebanon War in 1982. Specifically, he wants to remember what role he played (if any) in the Sabra and Shatila massacre of Palestinian civilians. He does this by interviewing soldiers he served with, asking them about their memories of the war, to reconstruct a timeline leading up to the killings. Apart from the end sequence (which will be discussed in more detail later), the film is animated so that the 'real' physical appearances of the director and his interviewees are absent, replaced instead by animated representations of them during the contemporary interviews and their younger selves in animated flashbacks. Included during these flashback sequences are surreal recollections told by his army friends.

As can be seen, memory or a lack thereof forms a key discourse within the film's narrative. This amnesia is reflected formally in the style of animation that is used, which refuses 'to make an aesthetic distinction between past and present' as the film switches between present day interviews and flashbacks of the conflict, and therefore does not give either prominence.<sup>445</sup> One could argue that if this consistent visual style were included in a live-action documentary with actors re-enacting the flashback scenes, the same effect would be produced. However, animation, with its break from a recognisable reality, enhances this sense of forgetting due to the events being depicted not resembling the world as we know and see it. The spectator questions the accuracy of the memories recounted during the film because of the use of animation.

Additionally, the animated sequences serve the purpose of trying to 'fill in' the gaps of Folman's memory, which he is unable to remember because of trauma.<sup>446</sup> Therefore, not only does the

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<sup>445</sup> Roe, p.11

<sup>446</sup> Roe, p.155

animation help the director and the spectator understand the meaning of historical events, it is a means to forming a more complete subjectivity.

The animation style resembles graphic novel illustrations and appears 'simultaneously realistic and fantastical' leading to some erroneous claims that it was achieved through Rotoscoping, by animating over live-action film.<sup>447</sup> Folman and his team kept the historical world as a reference point when designing the animation. The director shot a live-action version of the film first, which influenced characterisation and the Art Director, David Polonsky, used photographs of Lebanon in the 1980s when drawing the settings.<sup>448</sup> This means that although the animation represents a break from reality, the real world is a consistent point of reference.

The world created in *Waltz with Bashir* is not the 'reality' we know, nor is it surreal in having no resemblance to this world. Perhaps the best way to describe the animated film world is as 'irreal'. This term, borrowed from philosophy, is a midpoint between objective reality on the one hand and complete fantasy on the other. For Ward, '[t]he irreal is distinguished from both of these by virtue of being a *recognizable reality* that does not literally exist in the objective world 'out there' but might be said to be (hypothetically) derived from it.'<sup>449</sup> All of which is important for considering the film as a tool for Folman to confront his trauma and reconcile past events into his present sense of self.

Michael Billig describes the processes involved when an individual represses a traumatic historical event by citing Sigmund Freud:

Freud and Breuer wrote that 'a normal person' might be able to work through the memory of a traumatic event, bringing about 'the disappearance of the accompanying affect'. However, other people can find [...] the memories of such events too painful to recall, that they cannot come to terms with the past. Then, the memories may disappear from conscious awareness [...] [Freud] and Breuer claimed that, in such instances, 'it was a question of things which the patient wished to forget, and therefore intentionally repressed' [...]<sup>450</sup>

The key to reclaiming a repressed memory is to talk about it and this is what Folman does throughout the documentary. His interviews with various army comrades and psychological specialists in the film are thus examples of Freud's proposed 'talking cure'. Significantly, as

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<sup>447</sup> Roe, p.162

<sup>448</sup> Roe, p.162

<sup>449</sup> Paul Ward, 'Drama-documentary, Ethics and Notions of Performance: The "Flight 93" Films' in Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong, eds., *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2008), p.192

<sup>450</sup> Michael Billig, (citing Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, 'Studies on Hysteria', *PFL3*, pp 59-61) 'The Importance of Repression' in *Freudian Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.118

Folman is preparing to embark on his project, his friend Boaz asks, 'Can't films be therapeutic?' By the end of the documentary, when Folman has been able to remember the events leading up to the massacres, *Waltz with Bashir* seems to answer, 'Yes, they can' but only within an animated framework. The drawn images provide a distancing effect so that the events depicted are suitably removed from the site of the trauma so as not to disturb the patient/individual/spectator.

The clearest example of where *Waltz with Bashir* seemingly performs the process of repression is in the repeated image of Folman and some of his comrades bathing in the sea before emerging from the water naked and redressing on the shore. The director – and the film – returns to this sequence four times during the film. Is it a dream, a memory or a flashback? At first, due to the sequence being bathed in an orange glow, the slow movements of the animated figures and the hypnotic quality of Max Richter's musical score – titled 'The Haunted Ocean' on the soundtrack album – it has an oneiric effect that points towards the spectator interpreting it as a dream. However, as the action returns to this moment and as we become increasingly aware of the psychoanalytic framework the documentary is creating, the sequence begins to take the form of a return of the repressed; a key piece of the puzzle that will allow Folman to fully understand the part he played in the war.

And so, it proves to be the case. In a move that clearly signposts the film's blurring of animated memory and animated history, the final representation of 'The Haunted Ocean' sequence is revealed to be Folman's last memory of where he was on the night of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. The sequence continues to play past the point we last saw to show that the scene's orange glow is because of army flares descending from the sky near the refugee camps. Folman and his army friends turn at a street corner and are confronted by a group of frantic, weeping Palestinian women.

For Roe, animation as a non-indexical representation of the world is an appropriate technique through which to visualise memory:

It may seem counterintuitive that non-indexical media may be the most apposite way of remembering the past. But, the absence of indexical evidence of the past combines with the rich tapestry of animation's visual excesses, which go beyond merely re-presenting the past, to convey the meaning of both personal history and the act of remembering it. The absence of indexical images speaks to the absences in knowledge and memory that several of these filmmakers have in relation to their pasts. The process of making the films is, in a way, a performative act of becoming that which reconnects them to history.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> Roe, p.168

Folman achieves a reconciliation with his past by the end of *Waltz with Bashir*. However, as Roe has observed, the excess that animation is able to represent is founded on an absence of the corporeal body, which in turn could lay the film open to criticism. Writing about animated films generally, Roe elucidates on the political implications for documentaries that choose to represent their subjects via animation by stating that in order to be politicised these films need to show a 'real' body for the spectator to identify with and mirror.<sup>452</sup> It follows, then, that films 'that replace the bodies of those who are already marginalised in society with animated characters could be open to criticism of depoliticising and disempowering their subjects through the animated aestheticisation of their physical form.'<sup>453</sup> As previously mentioned, the animation in Folman's film uses the historical world as a reference point, but the fact remains that the images of the people we see throughout the film have been drawn. The effect of this is not just a potential disempowerment of those people depicted, but also a threat to their subjectivity. This is a negative response to using animation in such a context. On the other hand, this very absence of the physical bodies of the people speaking has been interpreted as a metaphor 'regarding the socio-political power of the interviewees.'<sup>454</sup> In this analysis, the physical absence of the interviewees and director represents a collective/national disempowering as a result of the bloodshed of war, which has had a direct impact upon the nation's sense of identity.

Unsurprisingly, the conclusion to *Waltz with Bashir* has received the most critical attention and it can be analysed as a site where discussions around subjectivity related to the use of animation and/or live-action images reaches its zenith. At this point in the film, Folman has returned for the final time to 'The Haunted Ocean' sequence, which is revealed to be a memory prior to the civilian massacres. Folman's younger self and his army friends have turned a corner to see a group of crying women, at which point the film takes its final and most drastic representational shift and cuts to live-action archive footage of the events. The music fades and the transition is bridged by the indexical sound of the sobs from the mourning women. The news camera tracks across bloodied bodies lying in collapsed buildings, and one woman comes up to the television crew shouting in anguished tones, her words not subtitled for non-native speakers.

Critics have responded differently to the ending of the film. In Roe's analysis of the sequence, including live-action images is, on the one hand, the logical conclusion to the director's investigation into his past memories: 'Folman has remembered his past and the journey of the film to find out what role he played in the massacres and to identify his flashback as true or false reaches its end.'<sup>455</sup> However, on the other hand, she questions whether including archive footage

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<sup>452</sup> Roe, p.88

<sup>453</sup> Roe, p.88

<sup>454</sup> Roe, p.96

<sup>455</sup> Roe, pp 167-168

undermines the documentary's use of animation and, in so doing, proclaims the 'epistemological superiority' of the former over the latter.<sup>456</sup> Roe concludes the way one interprets the ending depends on the film's claims to historical 'truth' or experiential 'truth'. Therefore, the 'television news images may reveal the truth of the event of the massacre, but the truth of the experience is, for Folman, as much about its incomprehensibility and his amnesia as about what actually happened.'<sup>457</sup> The animation here is a means of portraying the complex, traumatic and surreal experiences of the Lebanon War.

For other critics, the film's inclusion of live-action footage is not so easily justified. Joseph A. Kraemer writes:

Folman's explicit use of the documentary image of unfiltered carnage proves to be the moment where the history and essence of the massacre are betrayed [...] in *Waltz with Bashir*, the moment when the sight of the massacre is shared between the viewer and Folman's young character, everything is rendered as objective and knowable. But what revelations are attained through this live-action vision of the trauma? Perhaps Folman found his therapy in the making of this film, but for the viewer the live-action scene does not add meaning but instead reduces our understanding.<sup>458</sup>

Part of Kraemer's criticism of this section of the film rests on the representation of the Palestinian women whose cries are not translated. For him, they are robbed of a voice and become 'an object for Folman's representation; she is trauma incarnate [...] The Palestinians do not function as subjects in their own right.'<sup>459</sup> But let us return to the previous points around the absence of corporeal bodies and the potential depoliticising that takes place. If the spectator, to engage fully with the socio-political meanings of a film, needs a physical embodiment on-screen, do the Palestinian women seen in the archive news coverage fulfil this role? Perhaps it is significant that they are the only subjects in the film to be presented as both animated *and* physical presences, even over Folman as director. This observation problematises an accusation levelled at the film for biased representation of the Israeli experience of the conflict. Granted, the fact that their words go untranslated is problematic, but theirs is the most complete, or most recognisably 'real' identity in the film in terms of image and sound.

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<sup>456</sup> Roe, pp 167-168

<sup>457</sup> Roe, pp 167-168

<sup>458</sup> Joseph A. Kraemer, 'Waltz with Bashir (2008): Trauma and Representation in the Animated Documentary', *Journal of Film and Video*. Vol. 67 (3-4), 2015: 57-68 (65)

<sup>459</sup> Kraemer, 57-68 (65-66)

This chapter has analysed documentaries that incorporate visual and aural techniques to provide a reflexive address to the film spectator. *The Arbor* and *Notes on Blindness* achieve this by combining reconstructed performances by actors lip-synching to the recorded spoken testimony of the individuals they are performing as. This results in the performative treatment of speech impediment as a result of a traumatic upbringing and blindness represented for an able-sighted viewer respectively. In *Waltz with Bashir*, trauma is again the subject communicated this time through animation in order to establish a performative therapeutic frame for the film's director to reconcile past events during war.

As Bill Nichols describes in *Representing Reality*, '[t]he reflexive mode of representation gives emphasis to the encounter between filmmaker and viewer rather than filmmaker and subject.'<sup>460</sup> Therefore, the filmmakers of these documentaries are inviting the spectator to reflect on the documentary technique they are confronted by, not necessarily to evaluate its consequences for objectivity, but to consider the interaction between the documentary process and individual identity.

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<sup>460</sup> Bill Nichols, 'Documentary Modes of Representation' in *Representing Reality* (Indianapolis: Bloomington, 1991), p.60



## Chapter 6 Conclusion

In the introduction to my thesis, I summarised Erving Goffman's argument about how an individual often, consciously or not, adopts dramaturgical frameworks through which to communicate their identity. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman provided a systematic overview based on sociological case-studies as evidence of some of the techniques people resort to when involved in a variety of social interactions.

These include impressions *given* and *given off*; the former being an effect intended by an individual (Subject A) and the latter being an effect the person with whom Subject A is interacting (Subject B) concludes from Subject A's behaviour.<sup>461</sup> In this example, one can identify Subject A as the actor and Subject B as the audience. Related to the theatre, this social encounter mirrors the asymmetrical relationship between actor and audience, whereby the viewer determines their own impression of the viewed.<sup>462</sup> A person communicates these impressions by using different types of 'front', which Goffman specifies can be either 'setting' or 'personal'.<sup>463</sup> His terms find their theatrical counterpart in *mise-en-scène* and make-up/costume. Through his analysis, one of Goffman's conclusions is that 'ordinary social intercourse is itself put together as a scene is put together, by the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies. Scripts even in the hands of unpractised players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing. All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify.'<sup>464</sup>

Documentary film, because of its historical and critical associations with the representation of the 'real' world, can be loosely considered as the intersection of Goffman's social acting/theatrical acting hypothesis; after all, Bill Nichols used the term 'social actors' for those individuals who appear in non-fiction features.<sup>465</sup> The theatrical context exists as the spectator sits in a cinema (or any other viewing context) watching the documentary unfold on the screen in front of them. A major difference from a theatrical performance is that the spectator and viewed subject are physically and temporally separated, but there might exist a similar awareness on the part of the social actor in a documentary that he or she is being watched or will be at some point in the future. The social interaction, and the various performance tools an individual may draw upon to

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<sup>461</sup> Erving Goffman, 'Preface' in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Penguin: London, 1959), p.14

<sup>462</sup> Goffman, p.18

<sup>463</sup> Goffman, 'Performances' in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Penguin: London, 1959), pp32-34

<sup>464</sup> Goffman, p.78

<sup>465</sup> Bill Nichols, 'Documentary Modes of Representation' in *Representing Reality* (Indianapolis: Bloomington, 1991), p.42

manage this situation, is contained within the documentary film's diegesis. The event may be presented to the camera, the filmmakers or caught unawares. In any event, a person's actions onscreen captured by the documentary filmmakers will reveal aspects of that person's identity. The way these traits are framed – by the film director, editor, cinematographer, etc. – will influence how the film spectator responds to the filmed individual. This means that the documentary subject's identity is not fixed and is, to a greater or lesser extent, out of his or her control.

As influential as Goffman's theories have been to understand how people 'act' in everyday life, the way we communicate has changed dramatically since 1959 when his ideas were first published. For instance, the assumption underlying nearly all of Goffman's social case-studies is that these interactions are happening face-to-face; the two or more individuals are in direct contact, in the same physical and temporal space. Since then, technological developments such as the birth of the internet and the proliferation of digital production processes has had a profound impact on how we communicate with one another. These factors, and others, have led to increasing globalisation where 'the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society'.<sup>466</sup> For critic Mike Featherstone, this leads to two images or movements. The first is a move outwards 'of a particular culture to its limit, the globe. Heterogeneous cultures become incorporated and integrated into a dominant culture which eventually covers the whole world.'<sup>467</sup> A relevant, if simplistic, example of this would be a tourist's discovery of a McDonalds fast food outlet or Starbucks coffee shop in far-flung and unlikely locations. Featherstone's second image 'points to the compression of cultures. Things formerly held apart are now brought into contact and juxtaposition.'<sup>468</sup> In both of these positions, extension or compression, globalisation can be seen as an agent that renders national boundaries somewhat obsolete, with digital technologies able to shrink distances so that we can communicate with one another on opposite sides of the world. Unsurprisingly, these developments have led to changes in how we socially perform which, in turn, have affected the types of documentary we watch.

In their edited collection, *Performing the Digital: Performance Studies and Performances in Digital Cultures*, Timon Beyes, Martina Leeker and Imanuel Schipper outline some of the notable impacts the proliferation of digital technologies has had, and is having, on the ways we perform. They adopt the terms 'intra-action' and 'techno-social' to describe processes we experience on an

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<sup>466</sup> Martin Albrow, 'Introduction' in *Globalization, Knowledge and Society: Readings from International Sociology* (London: Sage in association with the International Sociological Association, 1990), p.9

<sup>467</sup> Mike Featherstone, 'Introduction: Globalizing Cultural Complexity' in *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity* (London: SAGE, 1995), p.6

<sup>468</sup> Featherstone, p.6

everyday basis.<sup>469</sup> The implications are that, rather than individuals merely interacting with technology, picking it up and putting it down when necessary, digital devices now occupy a pivotal role in how we live our lives and, in some cases, how our bodies physically operate. Equally, these intra-actions occur in a techno-social environment where the ways in which we communicate with one another depend upon our access to digital technologies. Beyes et al's conclusion is that 'the study of performativity in its heterogeneous dimensions cannot afford to ignore the agential forces and effects of digital technologies and their entanglements with human bodies.'<sup>470</sup> And these encounters between human and technological performance occur nearly all the time, everywhere.

For the ordinary city dweller, the experience of their modern urban environment has changed dramatically over the course of the last two centuries. In nineteenth century literature and social commentaries, they were called *flâneurs*. Charles Baudelaire prescribed the following features:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world [...]<sup>471</sup>

Consequently, the *flâneur* craves to be a spectator amidst a nameless mass of people and enjoys the anonymity the crowd provides. This definition constructs the *flâneur* as a passive observer of the city street scene. According to Schipper, it was Walter Benjamin who was amongst the first critical theorists to assign the *flâneur* a more active role.<sup>472</sup> Benjamin does this by analysing the city dweller's role in various nineteenth century novels and short stories – including Alexandre

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<sup>469</sup> Timon Beyes, Martina Leeker & Imanuel Schipper (eds.), 'Performativity, Performance Studies and Digital Cultures' in *Performing the Digital: Performance Studies and Performances in Digital Cultures* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2017), p.9

<sup>470</sup> Beyes et.al, p.9

<sup>471</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life' in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), p.9

<sup>472</sup> Imanuel Schipper, 'From *Flâneur* to Co-Producer: The Performative Spectator' in Beyes, Leeker & Schipper (eds.) *Performing the Digital: Performance Studies and Performances in Digital Cultures* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2017), p.193

Dumas and Edgar Allan Poe – and concludes that the protagonists become agents to the story.<sup>473</sup> Furthermore, in an observation that anticipates Goffman's social performance studies, Benjamin describes the *flâneur*'s city scene as a 'theatrical display, an arena'.<sup>474</sup>

Schipper draws parallels between contemporary digital culture and this more active interpretation of the urban city dweller in what amounts to the modern *flâneur* as equal parts observer and participant, and importantly, this shift is a direct result of the technology that surrounds us as we walk the streets and that we hold in our hands and store in our pockets.<sup>475</sup> In his conclusion, Schipper outlines some of the activities the modern *flâneur* can take part in:

Reviewing this article, the streets of European cities are occupied by multiple societies: In Istanbul, a mob, mobilized by a TV broadcast of a video call of [President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan, ready to use violence, is confronting tanks and soldiers. In London, ten thousand followed a social media invitation to demonstrate against Brexit. And in Hamburg, hundreds of teenagers who normally sit in front of computers (sic) games rove the streets to hunt Pokemon (sic) with their handheld devices.<sup>476</sup>

Writing in 2006, Henry Jenkins observes that an increased use of 'new media technologies' has influenced how cinema audiences view and interact with films, be that 'archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and recirculation'.<sup>477</sup> Web 2.0 encourages this level of user participation, and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Snapchat depend on users to create content. Whether this is a status update, a shared photograph or a short film upload, the digital landscape makes demands of a spectator that are more interactive than the traditional film-viewing experience.

This potentially means that a larger number of prospective filmmakers are able to hone their skills using new media, post the result on a video sharing site, and have it viewed by an audience, which could then lead to feature production. A case in point is David F. Sandberg's short horror film *Lights Out* (2013). After going 'viral' (the twenty-first century online measure of success) on Reddit, the three-minute film was optioned by Grey Matter Productions for \$15,000.<sup>478</sup>

<sup>473</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Flâneur' in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1997), pp35-66

<sup>474</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999 [1935]), p.347 cited in Schipper, p.193

<sup>475</sup> Schipper, p.195

<sup>476</sup> Schipper, p.207

<sup>477</sup> Henry Jenkins, 'Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars?: Digital Cinema, Media Convergence, and Participatory Culture' in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p.136

<sup>478</sup> Natalie Robehmed, 'How YouTube Short 'Lights Out' Sparked a \$145 Million Box Office Hit', *Forbes.com*, 23/09/2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2016/09/23/how-youtube-shortlights-out-sparked-a-145-million-box-office-hit/#3f18cc3c2b24> – accessed 21/09/2018

Coproduced by Warner Bros' New Line Cinema and made with a budget of \$4.9 million, the feature length remake would go on to gross \$145 million worldwide, with a sequel commissioned supposedly only thirty hours after opening.<sup>479</sup>

Participatory cultures have also helped shape a spate of recent documentary films. Firstly, consider the case of *The Square* (Jehane Noujaim, 2013), which follows a group of revolutionaries in Egypt in the lead up to and aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011 when President Mubarak was overthrown from power. Noujaim's approach, along with her camera crew, films the momentous events on street level with the protest groups as they are happening. This creates a feeling of immediacy, the handheld camerawork positioning the spectator in amongst the action. *The Square* also holds the noteworthy accolade of being the first crowd-funded feature film to be nominated for an Academy Award, thus demonstrating that film projects that rely on public engagement have found a place within the industry establishment.<sup>480</sup>

A similar sense of urgency is developed in the investigative journalism of *Virunga* (Orlando von Einsiedel, 2014), again centred on the mobilisation of a group of people this time tasked with protecting the eponymous national park's mountain gorillas from poachers and political turbulence in the Congo, and *Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom* (Evgeny Afineevsky, 2015) about political unrest and protests for the country to be more closely connected to Europe. Significantly, these last two documentaries were produced by online streaming service, Netflix, and *The Square* was distributed by the company. Given the films' subjects, their calls for social action told through urgent camerawork and 'history happening now' narrative structure, this seems to be a suitable fit with a streaming culture which is predicated on everything being available instantly for the paying consumer, the clock counting down to the next binge-worthy episode.

A cursory glance at these recent documentary examples indicates what Kate Nash, Craig Hight and Catherine Summerhayes have observed as documentary's renewed embrace of experimentation:

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<sup>479</sup> Robehmed, *Forbes.com*

<sup>480</sup> Samantha Hurst, 'And the Oscar Goes to...: Kickstarter Announces Funded Projects Nominated for the 2017 Award Show', <https://www.crowdfundinsider.com/2017/02/96595-oscar-goes-kickstarterannounces-funded-projects-nominated-2017-award-show/> - accessed 11/02/2018



[...] as new media technologies and new forms of communication emerge, contemporary documentary makers are engaging in a continual process of reworking the documentary project. They (and inevitably we, as audiences) are reimagining what documentary might become: nonlinear, multimedia, interactive, hybrid, cross-platform, convergent, virtual, immersive, 360-degree, collaborative, 3-D, participatory, transmedia or something else yet to clearly emerge.<sup>481</sup>

Documentary filmmakers may still rely on representing the 'real' in their films, but the form the final documentary takes and the ways a spectator are expected to respond to or consume the text have changed in accordance with social and cultural shifts in how we process information and, significantly for this project, how we represent ourselves to others.

According to critic Graham Meikle, the social media platforms we use allow us to perform certain actions. On the one hand, they 'enable anyone to develop and display their creativity, to empathize with others and to find connection, communication and communion'.<sup>482</sup> This is a decidedly positive summary of what these applications of Web 2.0 can do for us. However, they 'are also surveillance systems through which users become complicit in their own commercial exploitation' and the 'cost of this creativity, sharing and visibility is that the user loses control over what is done with their personal information, loses control over the new contexts into which others may share it, and loses control over to whom the social media forms might sell it'.<sup>483</sup> In other words, either the user's identity becomes too visible, or they lose their identity altogether.

These modern fears have been the topic of numerous documentaries, including the work of Laura Poitras on *Citizenfour* (2014) and *Risk* (2016), which take as their subjects National Security Agency analyst-turned whistle-blower Edward Snowden and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange respectively; both key figures in revealing how governmental agencies (in this case, the United States) use the information we provide online. Additionally, a film such as *Catfish* (Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost, 2010) highlights the ease with which an individual can manufacture and sustain a completely different identity due to the relative anonymity social media can provide. Whether the events in the film are 'true' or an elaborate hoax is somewhat beside the point. *Catfish* reveals the complexities involved in differentiating between social identity and online identity within our increasingly digitised world.

Taking the ubiquitous 'selfie', one can see how this social practice is emblematic of how we negotiate identity construction today. Meikle uses the 2014 Academy Awards selfie to deconstruct how it relates to our contemporary sense of identity by writing that a 'selfie is always

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<sup>481</sup> Kate Nash, Craig Hight and Catherine Summerhayes (eds.), 'Introduction' in *New Documentary Ecologies: Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp1-2

<sup>482</sup> Graham Meikle, 'Introduction' in *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p.3

<sup>483</sup> Meikle, p.3

a performance, both a presentation of oneself and a representation', a carefully choreographed act of spontaneity (the Oscars selfie was pre-planned, and the phone was provided by the show's sponsor).<sup>484</sup> And it is a self-conscious, image dependent, claim to visibility:

The most fundamental form of communication through social media is the image, and the most fundamental form of those images is the selfie. If social media are those that allow anyone, in principle, to say or make things, then what any one of us can make is an image of ourselves, and what those images say is *here I am*. The creation of the selfie is a moment of writing oneself into being in public. It is a performance, a pose, a claim. Me, myself and I. We hold the viewer at arm's length, but invite them in all the same. (emphasis in original)<sup>485</sup>

Meikle goes on to make an incisive link to Goffman's two forms of interpretation available to the viewer in social interactions here; those 'given' and 'given off'. Consequently, the image of ourselves we construct through selfies which we then post online are the impressions we *give* those looking at them. However, this information may be interpreted differently by the viewer and the image also *gives off* a variety of metadata. This could include 'the device, the location, the date and time, the IP address', all of which is incidental to the individual taking the photograph, but nonetheless is additional information for the viewer and, according to Snowden et al., government agencies to form their own picture of a person.<sup>486</sup> Furthermore, is it not the case that technological developments related to satellite surveillance – where global mapping applications create a bird's eye view of our homes and track our location on journeys – mean that we are conceivably being 'watched' almost all of the time in social situations? Meikle references Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon as a 'model of power based on visibility' in which the design of a prison would allow a central guard tower to view any of the cells at any time without the prisoners knowing when they were being watched; rather, they 'would have to behave at all times as though they were'.<sup>487</sup> Contrary to the 1950s context of Goffman's social encounters, in which the subject would likely only be aware of being watched when in direct physical contact with another person, today's social situation could reasonably describe an Orwellian dystopia of omniscient surveillance systems resulting in the necessity for an individual to constantly monitor their performance of identity. The remainder of the conclusion will analyse how this can be seen to influence the structures and subjects of contemporary documentary production.

In chapter 2, we looked at autobiography in documentary films and examined the implications the director's subjective filmmaking had for their construction of and relation to identity. Themes of autobiography appear in a different type of non-fiction film production; the essay film. As

<sup>484</sup> Graham Meikle, 'TMI (Too Much Information)' in *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p.93

<sup>485</sup> Meikle, pp94-95

<sup>486</sup> Meikle, p.95

<sup>487</sup> Meikle, p.106

defined by critics such as Laura Rascaroli and Alisa Lebow, the essay film, whose creator posits a 'well-defined, extra-textual authorial figure as their point of origin' and establishes 'a particular communicative strategy, largely based [...] on the address to the spectator' about ideas, arguments or themes being developed, can be regarded as the locus for central debates relating to how we perform the 'self' and how digital technologies have fostered participatory viewing cultures.<sup>488</sup>

Rascaroli attributes the essay film's subjectivity/autobiography to the internet and the personal stories of reality television and talent shows, but she also points towards what she calls 'more abstract causes':<sup>494</sup>

At both a thematic and philosophical level, subjectivity in nonfiction forms of contemporary filmmaking is, I argue, a reflection and a consequence of the increased fragmentation of the human experience in the postmodern, globalised world, and of our need and desire to find ways to represent such fragmentation, and to cope with it. I refer of course to that body of theory claiming that insecurity and fluidity are prevalent experiences of the postmodern condition. According to many contemporary thinkers, in postmodernity it is impossible to find anything solid, and we are all condemned to decentredness, fragmentation and 'liquidity'.<sup>489</sup>

Viewed as such, these films with clearly established author-creators can be interpreted as attempts to centre, piece together and solidify identity, both for the filmmaker's sake and for the film's spectators. However, the essay film's representation of subjectivity differs from autobiographical documentaries.

As the label suggests, the essay film is indebted to literary criticism and demonstrates an 'expression of a personal, critical reflection on a problem or set of problems'.<sup>490</sup> Furthermore, '[t]his authorial 'voice' approaches the subject matter not in order to present an ostensibly factual report (the field of traditional documentary), but to offer an overtly personal, in-depth, thought-provoking reflection.'<sup>491</sup> Of course, 'traditional documentary' can equally provide thought-provoking content to an audience, but it will tend to be less reliant on this address to an audience. Equally, whereas popular forms of documentary (such as Nichols' expositional mode) may include voiceover narration sutured to a known subject or, as in autobiographical documentary, the voice of the filmmaker themselves, the essay film's author will often abandon spoken narration altogether. Instead, the documentary filmmaker's voice will be 'interstitial; it is

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<sup>488</sup> Laura Rascaroli, 'Introduction: Subjective Cinema and the I/Eye of the Camera' in *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower, 2009), p.3 <sup>494</sup> Rascaroli, p.4

<sup>489</sup> Rascaroli, p.4

<sup>490</sup> Rascaroli, 'The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments' in *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower, 2009), pp32-33

<sup>491</sup> Rascaroli, pp32-33

played, indeed, in the liminal spaces between the empirical author and his or her textual figures'.<sup>492</sup>

The essay film can be identified within what Alisa Lebow calls 'first person cinema'. However, as she claims, this 'cinema of me' is more accurately termed as the 'cinema of we' because she finds that in many of these types of documentary the filmmaker is not the central subject.<sup>493</sup> For Lebow, '[t]his necessarily implies a dialogue between subjects, rather than insisting on the subject/object relations of the traditional documentary. And of course, beyond any notion of traditional dialogue, it also entails the dialogic splitting of subjectivity'.<sup>500</sup> What is evident here is the continued negotiation of separate forms of identity and how non-fiction film production reconciles these concerns into its very structure and subject matter. It will be useful now to analyse a case study example of the essay film – Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie* (2015) – to assess how these social, cultural and technological themes are being treated in one example of contemporary documentary.

Ostensibly, *No Home Movie* centres on the interactions noted avant-garde filmmaker Chantal Akerman has with her mother, Natalia 'Nelly' Akerman, a Polish immigrant now living in a Brussels apartment. At eighty-three years old, Natalia's health is clearly failing and so Akerman seems to have decided to document her mother to preserve her memories of her. They sit at the kitchen table and discuss Akerman's Jewish upbringing, Natalia and her family moving to Belgium after she was put in Auschwitz concentration camp during the Second World War, as well as Natalia's daily routine. Numerous scenes show the mother pottering around her apartment, the camera having been placed on a surface to capture events uninterrupted. Other sequences occur where Akerman records Skype conversations with her mother, the camera pointing directly at the computer screen. These are then interspersed with sequences of landscapes either from a stationary camera or out of a moving car window.

As is familiar with Akerman's film style, at times *No Home Movie* seems designed to be inaccessible for the spectator. There is a lack of narrational voiceover to frame the scenes and provide a clear thematic development through the film. And the sheer length of some of the static shots can be interpreted as a deliberate provocation to the audience to look away and/or lose interest. For example, the opening scene after the titles consists of a single shot of a tree being buffeted by strong winds on the coast and lasts for approximately five minutes. Is this designed to be deliberately inaccessible for an audience, or an invitation for us to find dramatic beauty in the image? Considering the film's structure, it would be understandable for the

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<sup>492</sup> Rascaroli, p.33

<sup>493</sup> Alisa Lebow, 'Introduction' in *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary* (Wallflower; Columbia University Press: New York, 2012), p.3 <sup>500</sup> Lebow, p.3

spectator to be at a loss as to what precisely Akerman's film is about. The title *No Home Movie* may provide some clues.

Firstly, the title may be Akerman's way of stipulating that her film is different to the 'home movie' phenomena where, spurred on by the increased availability and relative affordability of video and then digital cameras beginning in the 1980s, anyone could record domestic events. Therefore, Akerman may be suggesting that despite appearances, the film is different or 'more' than what it appears to be. Nick Pinkerton, in his review of the film for *Sight & Sound* magazine, explains this and other interpretations of what the title means:

Akerman, an eternally truculent artist who didn't suffer fools lightly, has put an instructional warning right in the film's title, which might implicitly be read (This Is) No Home Movie. There's also a double meaning here, for the interstitial views of desert landscapes in Israel, taken with a BlackBerry camera, evoke the myth of the eternal Wandering Jew – the title might also be taken as Homeless Movie.<sup>494</sup>

Understood in terms of the essay film, and if we accept Pinkerton's observation, then Akerman's oblique reference to the Jews' history of displacement could be understood as the film's 'critical reflection' on a topic or theme. However, the title could equally refer to meanings of the domestic sphere in the global age. During the first of Akerman's Skype calls with her mother, Natalia asks what her daughter is doing filming her. Akerman replies that she wants to show that there is no longer any distance in the world, her being in Oklahoma and her mother at home in Brussels. The 'interstitial views' Akerman includes around 'Maman' filmed at home thus represent a collapsing of national borders into a 'home' and 'elsewhere' dialectic. Themes of the global linked to transnationalism exist elsewhere in the film, such as in Natalia's recounting of her escape from Nazi Poland and when we hear her maid speaking in Spanish to someone on the phone and Akerman's conversation with the maid at the kitchen table, which is spoken in French and Spanish.

The centrality of technology and communication in this globalised world is highlighted by Akerman's almost fetishistic recording of her laptop during one of the Skype calls. In a touching interaction where neither mother nor daughter seem to want to end the call, Akerman zooms in to an extreme close-up of Natalia's distorted, pixilated face on the computer screen. We can just make out the reflection of Akerman holding her camera in the screen. This scene not only reveals Akerman's fascination with modern technology in terms of social interaction, it also demonstrates her relationship with the cinematic apparatus and its capacity to record these

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<sup>494</sup> Nick Pinkerton, 'Film of the Week: *No Home Movie*', *Sight & Sound*, July 2016, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/filmweek-no-home-movie> - accessed 15/02/2018

events. In a similar vein as Agnés Varda recording individuals who search harvested fields for leftover produce in *The Gleaners & I* (2000) and the obvious glee she feels with the flexibility of her new mini-DV camera, Akerman seems to relish the experimentation her camera allows, swapping between handheld reportage following her mother around the apartment and placing it in strategic locations in different rooms.

In doing so, Akerman's film, intentionally or not, references the anxieties internet technologies can create – as Meikle outlines. This is most pronounced in a scene where the camera is placed on a nearby surface and records Natalia and her maid talking and eating at the dining table. Once Akerman exits the room, the pair talk about how the way Chantal fusses over her mother causes Natalia to feel stressed and that her daughter is unaware that she does this. When Akerman returns to the room, the pair abruptly change the topic and their physical behaviour. The camera's recording of this moment exemplifies how individuals change the way they behave in relation to different social stimuli. It also causes us to question whether Natalia is aware that her daughter places the camera in various rooms during the course of filming. If she is not, then the film corresponds to a culture of persistent surveillance and if she is, then *No Home Movie* becomes a documentary version of Bentham's Panopticon. In the previously mentioned Skype call, Natalia displays an awareness of the documentary process and wider debates about online surveillance when she stops herself from expressing how much she loves her daughter. 'I don't want to say how beautiful you are because I know people will hear it', she says. This is a clear demonstration of how cinematic and technological apparatuses can cause people to change their behaviour in social situations.

Akerman's role throughout the film can be understood as a negotiation between, on the one hand, the positive impacts social media and digital technologies are having on our ability to communicate with one another and, on the other, the potentially negative effects it can have in terms of unwanted visibility. In a move which corresponds to earlier definitions of the essay film, Akerman remains an obscure presence in *No Home Movie* as if to emphasise that 'Maman' is the 'real' subject. We often hear her from behind the camera responding to questions from Natalia, but her face never appears clearly in the film. Instead, we see her from behind sat at the kitchen table during her conversations with her mother, reflected in windows, computer screens and bathroom mirrors, her camera acting as another barrier to her image. In one telling and humorous instance, she walks into the camera's eyeline which has been placed on a table. Momentarily forgetting where she has put it, she suddenly remembers and subtly dodges out of view.

Indeed, for all of Akerman's statements of her aim at showing that the world has become smaller because of digital technologies and the internet, and that people are more connected than ever

before, *No Home Movie* is full of empty spaces. The uninhabited, arid landscapes that fly past the car window, the opening beach and tree scene, and the repeated image of a back garden from Natalia's upstairs window, a solitary garden chair whose movement around the lawn as Akerman returns to it signifies the passage of time, all contribute to a deep sense of loneliness and isolation. Added together, they lead to the film's final image of the apartment hallway, a centre point in the floor plan of the domestic sphere we have become familiar with over the previous two hours. The tableau has a table in the centre of the frame on top of which sits a family photo. On the left of the frame is the doorway to Natalia's bedroom and on the right, we can see into the kitchen. Somewhere out of shot are the faint sounds of someone moving around the apartment, sniffling as they do so. The implication here is that this is Akerman (she is glimpsed in a previous scene packing a suitcase) and that her mother has now passed away. This enigmatic ending is given even more poignancy and intrigue considering Akerman's suicide on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015, two days before the film's American premiere at the New York Film Festival.

This has led to much speculation about the reasons for Akerman's decision to take her own life. She had suffered with depression for a large part of her life. Additionally, *No Home Movie* had opened earlier that summer at the Locarno Film Festival where it was greeted with boos (as is traditional for many festival screenings).<sup>495</sup> However, for what was clearly a deeply personal film, made more upsetting by her mother's passing who had influenced many of Akerman's films – especially the titular housewife in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* (1975)<sup>496</sup> – it is conceivable that the pain associated with this was too much for her to bear. Viewing *No Home Movie* with this extratextual information imbues the film with an even greater sense of the director's absence from the events depicted. Perhaps, then, what Akerman tells us is that this is not a home movie, but instead a eulogy for her late mother and a form of obituary for the filmmaker herself, the culmination of a life's work indebted to her dear 'Maman' and a reflection of how contemporary nonfiction filmmaking responds to new media technologies, and the consequences this has for our sense of self.

During the discussion of Akerman's film, I have aimed to demonstrate the rich and diverse self-presentations that we can find in contemporary nonfiction filmmaking. Films such as these attest to what Ilona Hongisto terms the 'soul' of documentary.<sup>497</sup> They do more than represent reality and instead show us individuals and situations in a state of becoming. Allied with the performative drive in documentary, an examination of subjective nonfiction film forms – such as

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<sup>495</sup> Pinkerton, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviewsrecommendations/film-week-no-home-movie> - accessed 15/02/2018

<sup>496</sup> Pinkerton, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviewsrecommendations/film-week-no-home-movie> - accessed 15/02/2018

<sup>497</sup> Ilona Hongisto, *Soul of the Documentary: Framing, Expression, Ethics* (Amsterdam University Press, 2015)

the essay film, home movies, and online presentations – is another potential area for research that will continue the analysis of performing identities established here.

In each of the chapters to my thesis, I have demonstrated the numerous intriguing ways documentary filmmakers are engaging with the performance of identities. Clearly, this is a complex representational process that reflects the difficulties for some people to understand their place in the contemporary world. Some consistent themes exist throughout my discussion of these, often quite varied, documentaries. Firstly, it is evident that these films attempt to show how understandings of a unified personal identity are overly-simplistic. The filmmakers I discussed in chapter 2 place themselves within these films and offer up multiple ‘selves’ to an audience. Additionally, by analysing *Senna* (2010) and *Amy* (2015) in chapter 3, the body itself, both in terms of appearance and what it ‘sounds like’ through the voice, can come to symbolise a form of canvas, upon which people’s impressions of a subject can be drawn. Identity can also be a profoundly political discursive tool. In chapter 4, I examined how LGBTQ+ documentary filmmakers and artists self-consciously emphasise the ‘look’ of their films in order to performatively display the queer identities of their film subjects, and, in the wider social sphere, to construct a (cinematic, social, cultural) space in which heteronormativity is not the dominant ideology. All of the case-study documentaries demonstrate varying amounts of reflexivity. However, in chapter 5, some examples were investigated which attempt to perform the experiences of some of the people they depict. Whether that was representations of speech disorders through innovative manipulation of the film’s image and audio, or the creation of a liminal space using animation for a filmmaker to negotiate the traumas associated with military service, these contemporary documentaries all problematise preconceptions of documentary as merely vehicles for ‘truth’ and demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of identity as represented through performance.

Therefore, returning to my research questions outlined in the introduction, it can be concluded that performance plays a varied and incisive role in contemporary biographical documentary films. Precisely because we live in a society increasingly dependent upon interactive and participatory digital viewing cultures, of which the performance of the self is so central, and a visual culture where the veracity of the image is problematised because of these technologies, documentary filmmakers are responding by incorporating performance techniques into their works. As a result, these films draw attention to how performance functions to construct individual identity and can be interpreted as invitations for spectators to reflect upon their own sense of self. Considering these factors, my thesis draws attention to the need for documentary criticism to re-evaluate the possibilities for documentary in the twenty-first century. As nonfiction media forms continue to converge, documentary film is being shaped and redefined accordingly.

The discussions I provide in these chapters should be seen as the first steps toward the critical redefinition of documentary film's relationship with performance, one that no longer relies on simple 'true/false', 'biased/unbiased', 'real/fake' binaries, acknowledging instead that the ways documentary filmmakers represent the 'real world' correspond to social and cultural contexts that determine how subjectivity is formed and understood.

To a significant degree, this function of documentary has been implied from its very beginning, when John Grierson wrote about the 'creative treatment of actuality' in reference to Robert Flaherty's work.<sup>498</sup> However, over subsequent decades, critical discussions have distorted the performative potential inherent in Grierson's description so that documentary became firmly associated with 'truth' and 'fact'. According to Ian Aitken, Grierson envisaged documentary film as being both a 'sociological and aesthetic' medium: 'sociological, in that it involved the representation of social relationships; and aesthetic, in that it involved the use of imaginative and symbolic means to that end.'<sup>499</sup> With the perceptions of 'truth' and 'fact' in our contemporary society being transformed by Web 2.0 and 3.0, virtual reality technologies and digital media, my discussions highlight how numerous documentary feature films released in the twenty-first century are responding to how these social changes prompt us to consider how we view, construct and become our 'selves' through a deliberate aesthetic of performance.

I began my research with the aim of complicating this simplistic and outdated assumption that documentary films should be solely committed to capturing events, people, and subjects in the world without using overt forms of performance. Instead, as we have seen in examples of autobiography, sporting biographies and films with LGBTQ+ subjects, contemporary documentary can play a powerful role in identity construction for both those individuals in the films and spectators viewing them in the wider social sphere. If, according to Goffman, all the world is not a stage, it remains a significant arena for us to define, experiment and showcase our various 'selves', and a rich source of personal stories for the documentary filmmaker to capture.

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<sup>498</sup> Paul Rotha, *The Documentary Film* 2nd Edition (London: Faber, 1952), p.70

<sup>499</sup> Ian Aitken, 'The Redemption of Physical Reality' in *European Film Theory and Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p.165



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*The Shining*. dir. by Stanley Kubrick. Warner Bros., et al. UK/USA. 1980.

*Sicko*. dir. by Michael Moore. Dog Eat Dog Films, et al. USA. 2007.

*Silverlake Life: The View from Here*. dir. by Peter Friedman and Tom Joslin. USA. 1993.

*A Song of Love/ Un chant d'amour*. dir. by Jean Genet. France. 1950.

*Splice*. dir. by Vincenzo Natali. Gaumont. Canada/France/USA. 2009.

*Squadron 992*. dir. by Harry Watt. Ministry of Information, et al. UK. 1940.

*The Square*. dir. by Jehane Noujaim. Noujaim Films, et al. UK/Egypt/USA. 2013.

*Stories We Tell*. dir. by Sarah Polley. National Film Board of Canada, et al. Canada. 2012.

*Strangers on a Train*. dir. by Alfred Hitchcock. Warner Bros. USA. 1951.

*The Sweet Hereafter*. dir. by Atom Egoyan. Alliance Communications Corporation. Canada. 1997.

*Tabloid*. dir. by Errol Morris. Air Loom Enterprises, et al. USA. 2010.

*Take this Waltz*. dir. by Sarah Polley. Joe's Daughter, et al. Canada/Spain/Japan. 2011.

*Target for Tonight*. dir. by Harry Watt. Crown Film Unit, et al. UK. 1941.

*Tarnation*. dir. by Jonathan Caouette. USA. 2003.

*Taxi Tehran*. dir. by Jafar Panahi. Jafar Panahi Film Productions. Iran. 2015.

*Tender Fictions*. dir. by Barbara Hammer. USA. 1996.

*The Thin Blue Line*. dir. by Errol Morris. American Playhouse, et al. USA. 1988.

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Iran. 2011.

*The Trials of Oscar Wilde*. dir. by Ken Hughes. Warwick Film Productions, et al. UK. 1960.

*Trouble in Mind*. dir. by Alan Rudolph. Pfeiffer/Blocker Production. USA. 1985.

*Up* series. Granada Television. ITV/BBC One. UK. 1964-present.

*Vets in Practice*. BBC. BBC One. UK. 1996-2002.

*Victim*. dir. by Basil Dearden. Allied Film Makers. UK. 1961.

*Virunga*. dir. by Orlando von Einsiedel. Grain Media, et al. UK/Congo. 2014.

*Waltz with Bashir*. dir. by Ari Folman. Bridgit Folman Film Gang, et al.

Israel/France/Germany/USA/Finland/Switzerland/Belgium/Australia. 2008.

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*Western Approaches*. dir. by Pat Jackson. Crown Film Unit. Netherlands/UK. 1944.

*Why We Fight* series of films. U.S. Army Special Service Division, et al. USA. 1942-1945.

*Wildflowers of Manitoba* (film installation). dir. by Noam Gonick and Luis Jacob. Premiered at Berlin International Film Festival. 2007.

*Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom*. dir. by Evgeny Afineevsky. Netflix, et al. UK/Ukraine/USA. 2015

*Word is Out*. dir. by Nancy Adair, Andrew Brown and Rob Epstein. Mariposa Film Group, et al. USA. 1977.

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