

JOURNEYS OF THE SELF: AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY AS NARRATIVE ENQUIRY

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Up to this very moment of my life as an intellectual trained in cinema and cultural studies, most of the works I've done has been purely critical inquiry. And as an attentive learner of academic discourse histories in the West, I have been very much cautioned against analytic models that are self-sufficiently text-based, as well as other methodologies that valorize the text and its exegesis. This time, my project can be described as an unusual attempt that brings together two activity centers that are often independent of one another: it is a focused engagement with media form and text, and I do so by turning myself into a creator.

Beginnings: the quest of narrativity

The paper I'm reading this morning concerns a video cycle in progress of mine, titled *4748 Moons and 13 Elliptical Years*, which began as a video project to document others, and gradually evolved into a piece of auto-ethnography. The cycle has seven parts -

- (1) "I Told Them My Camera was on"
- (2) "Trespassing World Cities"
- (3) "Other Space/Non-place"
- (4) "Love Diaries"
- (5) "Chair Talks"
- (6) "Camera Exercises"
- (7) "The Tickled Faces of Big Mansions"

The work opens with an automatic image sequence, which is repeated with variation to be the sectional transitions, or connective tissues. The sequence is made up of automatic text and dream sequences put together using a collage principle. The entire cycle is created from 13 years of video diaries of mine, from 1990 to 2003, plus other found footage, in formats from vhs, hi-8 to mini-dv forms.

My discussion will focus on the first segment in particular, titled "I Told Them My Camera Was On," a story appropriating, partially, the standard narrative flow of a woman's various stages of life to accommodate isolated moments of twelve women. The narrative thus formed is at once composite fictionalization and documentation of women as a collective, blending everyday life fragments of thirteen different women via a principle of chain association. It begins with 19-year-old Frances 13 years ago,

followed by various women, and ends with two another “Frances”. “I Told” has three inseparable objectives of its own. First, it plays with the thin line between remembering and fabricating, recording and staging, and documentary and fiction. Second, it subverts mainstream causal narrative logic and shows the thirteen women’s stories as a network of acquaintances based on the rule of playful chain-connectivity. Third, each woman is shown in an isolated moment of her life, by which I question the necessity of an epic approach and those views of life history that depends on depth hermeneutics. Instead, a composite story made up of women from diverse backgrounds is invented. Standard theses on cultural differences and identities, realities of growing up and growing old and so on are also subject to queries. In “I Told,” the scratches and jerking lines of the images from older format footage have been preserved to signify the multiple sheets of time-space and the passing away of time. Towards the end of the work, the narrative takes on a new style, like an organism about to move into a new phase of life. Many questions about image-making and representation have emerged in the process of making this work: early cinema’s direct presentational style, what it means to write women’s history and so on, which will form the core of this paper.

A simple characterization of the entire video cycle project would be that I have transformed a memory tank in video form into a mnemonic system via a carefully composed video work. In doing this, I necessarily engaged myself with the double play of the referential immediacy of the moving image and the discursive force of narrativity.

Theory Is Practice: creative intervention as theoretical investigation

Before detailing the mnemonic system I’ve created, I would like to situate my project within the concerns of Cultural Studies.

My point of departure is the thought of **Theory-as-praxis**, a position very much demanded of me in the context of pedagogic experimentation in a school that seeks to uphold inter-disciplinarity in the quest for a meaningful curriculum for the study of the new media. As a situated scholar, one response has been to develop tactics of creative intervention as theoretical exploration, in order to help my own students in the integration of cultural studies, cinema histories and artistic creation. The position I’ve developed regarding the relation between video and theory, therefore, is to interrogate theories via video/art-making and to subsequently re-fine my own theorization. Put simply, I argue that the production of new knowledge is possible via creative activities (not only critical inquiry).

In forming my “theory-as-praxis” tactics and the integration of criticality and creativity via expressive forms and structures, I have been particularly drawn to Judith

Butler's idea of a "critical intellectual" and the necessary commitment to engage in questioning set norms and "basic" assumptions. Sara Salih has succinctly summarized Butler's view in the latter's recently published anthology, highlighting the task to call into question ordinary language, such as grammar and style, to look at how we structure the world via language in order to bring "newness" to the world. In my video project, my task to question language has taken a shared concern with a different focus -- in **narrativity**, and particularly visual grammar and norms that have been taken for granted.

In a nutshell, my interventionist project has two objectives: on the one hand to form a constructivist narrative aesthetic as my creative tactics and, on the other, to organize my critical engagement mainly via a series of deconstructionist narrative play. That is to say, after Butler, I have engaged myself in the politics of writing by foregrounding the issue of "style," thus setting off my interrogation. By doing this, I argue for the reconsideration of the value of contemplation on expressive forms by re-situating the question within the context of performativity. By a performative approach, I mean to engage in the creation of style while questioning it, or to embed the latter in the former, or to playfully reveal the function of established styles and visual aesthetics by adopting them in a design of my own.

In the name of constructivist narrative aesthetic, I also appeal to scholarship in the new media, particularly the notion that the virtual is capable of producing knowledge, to work on a narrative scheme that not only plays with the collapse of the fictional and the documentary, but also with rules that have the generative power to keep the narrative open and growing infinitely, at least theoretically so. The use of chain association as the structuring principle in "I Told" allows me to string up thirteen women who may or may not know one another into a possible rational narrative. Basically, although I, the ethnographer, am not a main character of the video, I am also/actually the hidden protagonist. Each woman in the chain only knows the ones that come before and after them. Otherwise, they form a comprehensible network via me. While writing this, I recall the famous discussion on the "six degrees of separation" in the "small world theory."¹

Another key issue that incites my video cycle is to dialogue with a popular disciplinary object, "the everyday," in Cultural Studies. Rather than taking up well known text book items on the list of study objects of the everyday (such as food,

¹ Mathematicians Duncan Watts and Steve Strogatz (1990s) proposed we can think of people as *dots*, and *links* of acquaintance as lines connecting them, and *grids* forms by links, thus forming small world networks. In conjunction, John Guare writes, "Everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people." The general idea is that a hidden pattern is the key to how networks interact and exchange information. "Small world" theories have been much discussed in new media creation, especially in its forming a possible lineage to networked arts such as concrete poetry in 20th century experimental art practice.

fashion, sport and so on), I have taken a different path: I captured what there actually was when my camera was brought to a certain place at a certain time. The everydayness that I have “collected” and discovered in my footage is a fine mix of mundane quotidian chores, fantasies, dreams and self-performance, defying any purist, definable classification. Related issues springing out of an attention to the “everyday” include: what is ethnography, the fine line and dialog between video diaries and auto-ethnography, feminism and autobiography and so on.

Storying Lives: collapsing diaries and ethnography

Both Maria Pini and Catherine Russell have spoken on video diaries as something more than the documentation of personal thoughts. In Pini’s view, **video diaries** are active moments of storying lives, the conscious fabrication of new visual fictions of femininity; they are themselves creative statements on the relation (dialog) (exchange) between particular technologies of representation and particular constructions of the self.² To Russell, “autoethnography” builds upon the understanding/acknowledgement of one’s “personal history” being necessarily implicated in larger social formative and historical process.”³

In the process of making sense of my creative project, I have also appealed to Jean Rouch’s thoughts on (visual) ethnography, which assert that the practice is necessarily “shared” and “participatory,” which I have expressed in the title of my work, “I Told Them My Camera Was On.” This justifies the visual ethnographer’s task to seek for a subjective entry into the ongoing flow of a situation. There is no real transparency of ethnographic knowledge as the boundaries between the self and other dissolve along the ethnographic process in which the ethnographer persistently makes effort to possess the situation imaginatively.⁴ As will be seen, my own presence in this particular section of the work is the carrier of the camera whose presence is only intermittently revealed. At the same time, I constantly recede to the role of the minor object of the others that I put in front of my camera. In these moments, I become a form of uneven, quiet presence in other people’s brief episodes, sometimes as a documentarian, other times as a participant, manipulator, facilitator, interpreter, impersonal narrator, go-between, or pure observer. Most of the time, I was secondary, the momentary intervener, or the guest of other people’s stories. In

² Maria Pini, “Video diaries: questions of authenticity and fabrication,” in *Screening the Past*, uploaded December 1, 2001.

³ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: the work of film in the age of video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 276.

⁴ See Jean Rouch’s “Vicissitudes of the Self,” cited in Catherine Russell’s “Ecstatic Ethnographic: Filming Possession Rituals” (C. 8).

other words, I have attempted the making of “self knowledge” via subduing my own subject position.

A Performative Approach: feminist re-invention of autobiographic narratives

My task of performing the self can be summarized in the following four methods. First, I carried my camera along to various everyday life occasions to capture images without deliberate purposes, that is, there are no preconceived images. Second, I invented rule-driven procedures to organize the images I accumulated. Third, I structured the work, via the use of simple texts on images, as the “conscious and self-conscious dialogue” with my mental process.⁵ Fourth, I collapse various recognizable narrative styles – early cinema’s direct presentation style and home videos’ direct address to the camera, the standard narrative of a woman’s life cycle, the use of interviews, talking heads and direct cinema style in documentary films – to foreground the constructed nature of knowledge in narrativity.

The work of composing has been the process of performance, fictionalization, sense-making and analysis. [I started out 13 years ago to just want to experience changes resulting from long durations and the magic of the passing away of time.] My feminist engagement is materialized as autobiography based on inter-subjectivity, realized via discursive organization, part of which means the seeking after relationship between different personal narratives, an idea Tess Cosslett has contemplated.⁶ My own extension of such a thought is to take autobiography as both a tool to create connections between fragments of different individuals’ lived moments and the auto-biographic act as performativity, that is, the writing process in itself. I play with automatism, chain association and standard plot lines of a woman’s life to create a system, and a narrative process, that is at once spatial and mnemonic. For my 13-year bulk of video diaries now becomes a special memory pool of deposable and retrievable past for the free play of narrativity. The possible number of narratives one might create from the pool is infinite.

Tess Cosslett has argued for feminism and autobiography to inform one another. In my work, I have opened up autobiography to be an inter-disciplinary, multiple, practice of trans-genres, which is central to the pursuit of feminist projects. From a different angle, auto-biographies are locations of self-performance and the articulation and consumption of cultural capital.

In the previous section on feminist intervention on the use of language, I have introduced my narrative strategy as **a series of “deconstructionist narrative play” via “constructivist narrativity.”** I would like to fill in the details as follows:

⁵ Robert Morgan, *Gary Hill (Art + Performance)*, p. 186-7.

⁶ Tess Cosslett et al, “introduction,” Feminism and Autobiography, p. 3.

<i>Point of intervention</i>	<i>Realization in "I Told Them My Camera Was On"</i>
*to play with language [visual language] [a visual language built upon a linguistic-semantic analogy]	Adopting the early cinema impulse to free film from literary models: –most shots do not have a strong narrative function, do not facilitate comprehension via the viewer’s piecing a scene with those that come before and after it, but rather “show” a person performing.
*to play with [mock] mimesis (photographic image’s mimetic function)	Appeal to early cinema impulse to dismiss mimesis: -anti-signification; moments of the individual women are ambiguous as to whether they are signifier of social functions/social roles or not -on the narrative level, they do form that critique, which is just why I line them up along a familiar grand narrative
*to play with narrative logic [coherent events, completed story/plot, impressions of wholesomeness of reality]	Avant-garde impulses (inspired by early cinema): -highlighting the “artificiality” of narrative activities -Instead of causality, my narrative logic employs ellipsis, juxtaposition, chain association, accidental connectivity, double-to-multiple narrative -I made the statement that a woman’s personal history does not have to be understood as a causal sequence, and that a moment in the life of a woman doesn’t have to be necessarily understood in a figure-and-ground manner against many back stories or in the context of a much larger system of life events -- but that individual moments are sufficiently expressive of who they are [subjectivity in action; subjectivity as a process of unfolding; subjectivity as here-and-now performance] [emphasis on surface, bracketing of depth-hermeneutics; a materialist stance]
*to play with typical life stories that mark the “normal” phases of life a woman would go through	-keeping the standard clinical narrative but via assembling different women’s fragments of life -counter “counter-fiction” of femininity according to the more established feminist push ⁷

The Evolution of “I Told”

I have discussed the necessity of narrativity to realize my feminist as well as how the creation of text is a most productive way to critique and investigate textual conventions. I have also argued that what accounts for the basis of ethnographic truth could be opened up to include “situations” and “moments,” and I have turned this into practice. When isolated as moments, lived experiences acquire a new freedom and new relations in an associative network, which is my performative narrativity, an activity that makes my mental process visible. “I Told” is meant to be

⁷ Pini, p. 2.

an “anti-signifier,” yet it plays with signification on the narrative level.

To further highlight the performative quality of the process of constructing and compositing “I Told” from my bulk of materials, I need to conclude this piece with a brief explanation of how the final version evolved from its previous versions. The first version is purely in collage style, a blender of images that strike the stream of consciousness. The second version sought the creation of the chain: I met Frances, I introduced Frances to Fonna, through whom I met Wai-mei, who then through me met Annie, who shares a close friend of mine, Eva, who plays a bride in Annie’s video fiction; but in real life I have been surrounded by brides one after another among my own sisters...etc. This version, however, has no subtitles or textual explanation. The third version brought in the explanatory text, which significantly enhanced the artificial nature of narration. The final version brought back the blender as an important interlude device, or connective tissues between the different women’s individual moments, to denote the multiplicity of time. The final version signifies my own response to the first rough cut documented as a journal entry of mine:

On watching the first cut of the women sequence:

Feeling estranged

I stared at images I made acquiring a new appearance,

Forming a new world I did not know,

Born into a new life I’m yet to discover.

I found myself in a void of immobility,

Stuck with the 21-gram lightness to recall

Where these images came from,

From what stories I had trespassed,

And from whose histories I had appropriated.

Flashes of the aging process,

Flashes of swelling bodies,

Faces that defy the containment of a shot...

They tell me nothing...

They tell you nothing...

Torrents of voluntary presence, or streams of the unconscious?

There, being there.

Here, not there, never there ever.

Each face a token

Each other face the mockery of that token.

*The optical unconscious,
Or energies in a flux?*

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