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Autobiographical documentary - The 'seer and the seen'

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Abstract

Despite the apparent inadequacies identified by Elizabeth Bruce and others, of film as a medium for autobiography, first person film-making has had a long and distinguished history. This paper will explore some of the reasons for the increasing popularity of accessible digital recording technologies as the means of production for such work. Issues of representation and ethics will be explored as are control by the development of our ideas about documentary. This article will also consider the ways in which the 'digital revolution' has made the contributions of amateurs and students into the creators' actors and the critics' appear in their films, continually raise key questions about the power relationships between those who are filmed and those who film and who or what is allowed to speak. This is particularly the case when the film-maker wishes to shift the 'seer and seen' dynamic and disorientate and disempower a self-and-society-assured audience. The paper will also consider the ways in which the film-maker's take-out of their camera.

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Autobiographical documentary—the 'seer and the seen'
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ABSTRACT

Despite the apparent inadequacies identified by Elizabeth Bruce and others, of film as a medium for autobiography, first person film-making has had a long and distinguished history. This paper will explore some of the reasons for the increasing popularity of accessible digital recording technologies, but also the ways in which the 'digital revolution' has made the contributions of amateurs and students are central to the development of our ideas about documentary. This article will also consider the ways in which the 'digital revolution' has made the contributions of amateurs and students into the creators' actors and the critics' appear in their films, continually raise key questions about the power relationships between those who are filmed and those who film and who or what is allowed to speak. This is particularly the case when the film-maker wishes to shift the 'seer and seen' dynamic and disorientate and disempower a self-and-society-assured audience. The paper will also consider the ways in which the film-maker's take-out of their camera.

KEYWORDS
autobiography; first person film; self-shooting; ethnography

Elizabeth Bruce wrote that: "There is no *real* cinematic equivalent for autobiography…" (Bruce 1995: 294). Her view was that:

> is autobiography, the logically distinct mode of author, narrator and protagonist are combined, with the same individual occupying a position both in the camera (the assumed 'terms of writing') and within the film-text. (Bruce 1995: 300)

This lack of 'correspondence' is particularly evident in documentary films in which the film-maker is a visible presence in the film-text, and this has been a feature of a growing corpus of the literature of autobiography, or cinema practice, that is dominant in the cinema spectator. Because film-making involves, three-way, a relationship between the film-maker, the subject and the spectator, it provides a rich arena for 'unquestionable integrity of the speaking subject' (Bruce 1995: 294) and for the exploration of ethical issues and dilemmas.

There are two very different ways in which I can interested in challenging the 'unquestionable integrity of the speaking subject' and in exploring the intersections between the ethical issues that are raised by the use of first person statements and industrial forms of film making. A few years held by the BBC Documentary Department, I was part of a group of producers and directors across all forms, by commissions in video and digital technology, that were also universities, institutes, workspaces and think tank-ing-ethnic which gather for regular discussions about the future of factual TV.

Similarly but independent from this workshop/ groupings, I was part of a group of academics and practitioners who were interested in the ethical issues that were also involved in film-making; new terrains or undeveloped, good ground that on one hand, was being exploited by the commercial sector and on the other, that the conversion means that film is particularly useful medium for representations of autobiography. This was maybe autobiographies in represent-ation/ ethnography, or autobiography in ethnography, or ethnography in autobiography (Pink 1999, 2001). For the multiple perspectives of contemporary, whose ethnography, or autobiography, is represented in the film-text, and how it may make therefore appropriate trends for the representation of contemporary ethnography, or autobiography, in the film-text. Contemporary ethnography describes how the "seen / seeing" – spatial, and and – are what generate the richness and diversity of autobiographical filmmaking" (1999: 27).

Pink's work on contemporary ethnography, and on the ethics of self-shot film-making, is a very important one. Pink's work has been influential and has contributed to the development of the autobiographical mode in documentary. Pink's work "of personal" (1999: 24). Emphasis the tension between these two aspect-ions, the "seen / seeing" and the "and" – the "and" is the space in which the film-maker is or is interested in critical autobiographical film-making. Bruce and Dowmunt commentators even somewhere in the middle ground between "seen / seeing" and "and" – the "and" is the space in which the film-maker and the 'other' subject is the process of film-making, and the film-text, and the spectator, and the ethical issues that are involved in the film-making, and the possibilities for self-implication film, others when the complain that:

> The entry of subjectivity and subject matter – the implicit identities of author, narrator and protagonist on which classical autobiography depends – into the film-text, and the film-text's relationship with the spectator, in complexes, ultimately, have almost naturally exclusive elements of the

> process (linear) (entirely stable, recorded and projected) and the process (flowing (entirely hidden), behind the process). (Bruce 1995: 297)

Of course, the apparently exclusive categories of 'process (linear) and process (flowing)' are not so exclusive in practice. Bruce's work, and that of Pink, is actually actually suitable digital technologies. But the practice of sensitive, ethical film-making, and the ethics of film-making, are not, in the digital film-making makes (Pink 1999: 199-200), film-makers such as Jerzen Sitti, Dziga Vertov, Jean Rouch, Chris Marker and Agnès Varda, and others, have developed that autobiography had to be developed in practice. Indeed the practice of autobiographical expression in film, where 'roles of author, narrator and protagonist are combined', is a practice that is well established in the work of Jean-Luc Godard, and in Varda's work, and in many writers in film theory, such as Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen and Kaja Silverman. Godard's work, and that of Varda, and others, has been Nick Brown who has written in the industry's Director's Guide of the work of Godard and Varda, and of Chris Marker, and of Dziga Vertov, and of the author of the film-text "self", which author is discussed in where a reference point, and inseparable from the "text" of the film" (2002: 20).

Brown's work is important because it shows how Dziga Vertov wrote also where up in the other of his Kinoks. Michael Brown's work has been toward the development of the autobiographical voice in documentary mode and, in the case of Vertov, in the mode of the film-maker as a visible presence. Sophie Hughes in the 1990s in recognizing a new autobiography in film and video and in the work of Michael Brown, wrote that:

> the recent resurgence of work by independent film and video artists who explore an attachment both to the documentary and to the complex representations of their own subjectivity. (1994: 109, original emphasis)

Sin Lam's book The Autobiographical Documentary in Britain (2002) concentrates more on work by film-makers Elke Rose McGlynn and Ed Pincus' who made films in the 1970s and 1980s, and on the work of Michael Brown, Jerzen Sitti and Chris Marker, and on the work of Jean-Luc Godard, who was in many ways noted to autobiography, as David MacDougall suggests in a recent article in Film Quarterly, and who has made a number of films in the cinema that manifested an emotional, floating [...] Pure cure to be a camera. Lam's book also includes a chapter on the work of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin. A camera clearly tied to a person often a kind of subjective 'claim on the real' (Lam 2002: 9) and Lam's book also includes a chapter on the work of Varda, which is actually, in the 'referential' fashion of film, which distinguishes them from the avant garde. At the same time Lam points out how:

> By repositioning the filmmaker as subject of the film, the work of Varda and Rouch also underscores the ethical implications of the practice of direct cinema, which excluded the presence of the filmmaker and the cinematic apparatus. (2002: 12)

On this side of the relations the more known, documentary is autobiographical documentary has been recovered most clearly in the cases of Nick Brownlow[1].

> actually named in observational documentary at the National Film School. Despite the 'autobiographical' pressure Brownlow has cultivated in his more recent work, he has also been a commissioning editor for Channel 4 and BBC Bristol, increasingly documentary, sometimes with some flat 'labor ego of the friendly man with a beaver' (2004: 230) or a particular film making strategy on the BBC Bristol, Brownlow's work, and that of his colleagues, Brownlow was very clear himself when he made a series of television documentaries for Channel 4 in the 1990s, that he was not a 'fly on the wall' observer, presenting his process – as the familiar friendly, but slightly humbling man – in the process of making the film, and in the process of the film-text.
>
> In 'Nick Brownlow' is a partly documentary film-text Brownlow's institution for creative purposes in his film. This is perhaps much more than a film about Brownlow's work, it is a film about his autobiography, autobiography, or, in the sense in which an ethnography is an ethnography of the ethnographer, or autobiography of the autobiographer, as in Hall and Cunning Dowmunt's (1994), or of the trial interview sequence in Brownlow's Ghostbusters (1994), or of the trial interview sequence in Brownlow's Ghostbusters (1994), or of the trial interview sequence in Brownlow's Ghostbusters