

MOTHER PICTURES: autobiographical video work in progress

(Presenting this paper at PARIP 2003 was my first outing as a Fellow in the Creative and Performing Arts, based in the Media and Communications Department at Goldsmiths College, and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board. The 3 year Fellowship is supporting a project investigating the practice of first-person, video diary and autobiographical filmmaking. The fellowship started officially at the beginning of September 2003 - two weeks before the PARIP conference – which I'm saying partly as disclaimer: what follows is very much a first draft and speculative, more in the form of notes from the presentation than a finished argument.)

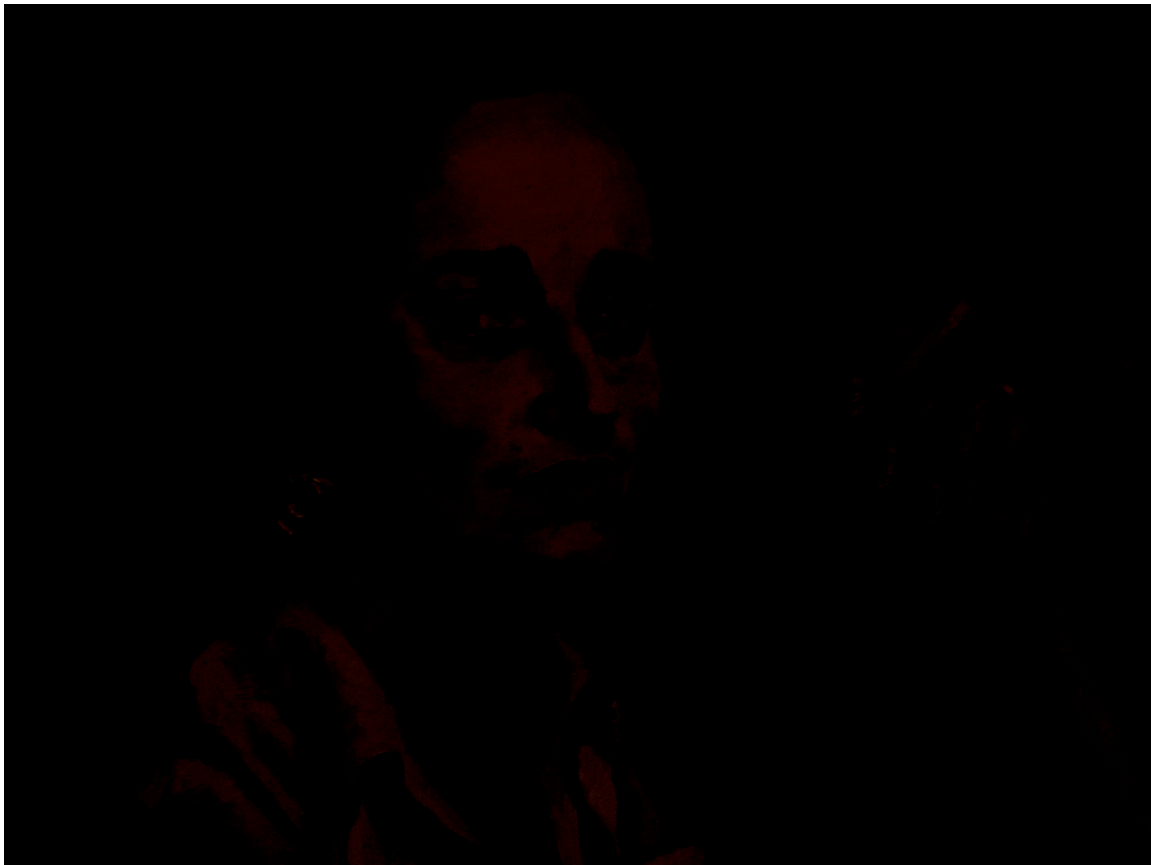
Why look at autobiographical documentary as a practice/research project? Three linked reasons, from my perspective:

- 1) The significant degree to which problems – ethical, aesthetic and epistemological – derive from the address of documentary work – I'm thinking of Bill Nichols' phrase characterising expository documentary: **we speak to you about them** (Nichols:199,) – which, for me, indicates that the subjects of documentary – **them** – are necessarily subject to a degree of objectification – of 'othering'.
- 2) Autobiographical filmmaking changes the address to **I speak to you about me** – author and subject become one. Which may reduce the objectification of the subject – though not necessarily the other subjects surrounding the author - but it does almost certainly introduce some visible reflexivity into the process: **you can see and hear me speaking to you about me and other people in my life.**¹

¹ See Dovey: 2000 p27 for a discussion on how the 'tradition of reflexive documentary filmmaking has intersected with the new imperatives of first person media to produce a range of new modes of reflexivity.'

- 3) What this does is then push into the foreground the I/me, the/my self that's supposedly in charge of the authoring process – at a time when individual authorship is thought to be dead – or at best scattered in post-modern fragments.

MOTHER PICTURES was a live presentation of a first draft script/storyboard for a potential film about my mother and my relationship with her. This is a portrait of her in her twenties.



It was painted in the 50s by the local vicars wife. It hung in the dining room of the house I was born and grew up in – the first example in my memory of the eerie way a portrait can follow you around a room with its eyes. It is, to me, recognisably my mother, but also strikes me now as a very stylised, glamorous image, reminiscent of other images of women of its time – almost anonymous.

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

The research questions I wanted to explore in the presentation were:

1. How to make a film about my SELF, and my self's relationship with my mother, at the same time as acknowledging and working with the questionable and fragmented status of the self as a unitary subject and the origin of autobiography (a film that doesn't come from the 'essence' of me [nor attempts to reveal the essence of my mother], but sees my authorial presence in play with other social and cultural perspectives and forces)?
2. How to make the film in a way that uses memory work – in Annette Kuhn's words – *'to explore connections between 'public' historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender and "personal" memory'* ? (Kuhn: 1995 p)

My research methods mainly consisted of gathering together and organising the material for this presentation. My mother has been dead for 8 years, and my father died earlier this year. One of his legacies was the oil portrait above, another was a big bag of family photos, some familiar from my childhood, others glimpsed on mantle-pieces in the various houses my parents occupied in my adult life, some I don't remember ever seeing before. Also relevant to this project – and my other major 'research method' - is the fact that I've been (what's known in humanistic psychotherapy as) 'working on myself' – both individually and in groups for the last 25 years or so.

I wanted in the presentation to suggest a range of contrasting perspectives on my mother's life, and on my relationship with it, by looking at my heritage of visual evidence - different pictures from different sources. The evidence I showed was biographical rather than autobiographical, in the sense that I didn't make the pictures myself: my autobiographical input came in the way I edited them, put

them together – an attempt to make coherence out of these fragments and my memory. At the same time I'm aware that this coherence is my fiction:

The fragmented self-image .. can only, paradoxically, in the end be known and represented from the perspective of an imaginary wholeness ..

(Anderson: 2001 p75)



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

She was born thirty years or so before this picture was taken, on the fringes of wealth and privilege, the daughter of her mother's second marriage. Her mother was an Anglo-Irish aristocrat, and her first marriage had been to the Earl of Jersey. He was older than her and died relatively young. She then fell in love with

her eldest son's personal tutor – my mother's father – and their 'upstairs–downstairs' marriage caused a minor scandal in the papers. They both died when my mother was in her teens, and her life after that had little of the material security that she was born into, and I think at some level always felt entitled to.

She was bright and intelligent, but went to work for the British Council after school, rather than to University – a decision I think she always regretted. She enjoyed her work, which involved liaising with writers, and harboured ambitions to write herself. I found this article in my fathers' things from the Evening standard of the sixteenth of November 1948.



The Polish Air Force Association was where she met my father – and then gave up this glamorous city life when she married him, moved to the country and gave

birth my sister and myself. Unsurprisingly, and in common, I think, with many women of her generation, she often gave off a feeling of thwarted potential, a deep disappointment with the world.

I remember interminable conversations with her in the evenings, conversations which were dominated for me by a brooding sense of her alcohol-fuelled despair. Her posture was always the same, her body curled up in a corner of the sofa, her back hunched, her eyelids heavy so they seemed to be fluttering, half-closed, her speech slow, slightly slurred, weary and effortful. Whatever we talked about, the pattern was always the same, leading inexorably to her concluding once again to herself that she was worthless, her life meaningless. I don't have any photos of her to illustrate this part of her – a testimony to the selectivity of the family album – but this was a favourite cartoon she kept in a large frame in her bedroom:

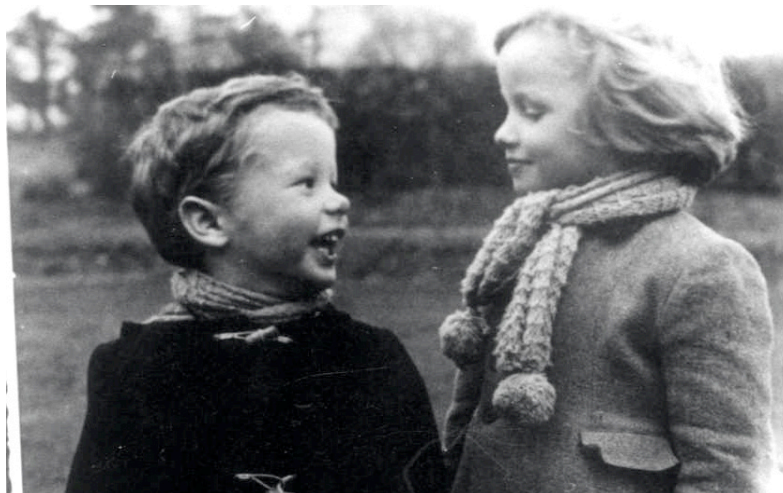


along with pictures of my father, my sister, me and a few of her close friends. Although this was the only image I found to show this embittered side of her, there were plenty to illustrate the aspects of her I adored. Before going out to parties she would come to say goodnight to my sister and I in our bedroom,

showing off her dress. She'd be framed in the doorway of our bedroom, radiant in a halo of light from the passage, a waft of newly applied perfume reaching us.



This same one-sidedness of family photos² is clear in the ones of me. My alienation from my mother and loneliness in my childhood remains hidden. Much more evident in the photographs, and in some ways as true - is that I had a lovely, happy childhood, playing with my sister in the big garden:



² A concept made familiar by the work of Jo Spence among others. See Spence & Holland 1991.

For the next part of the presentation I turned to representations of my relationship with my mother in my adult life, both in my own dreams and in a couple of TV documentaries in which I appeared.

DREAMS

I'm interested in the potential of telling autobiographical stories in pictures through dreams – both because of their visuality and because they come from another part of the 'I' – another, maybe less controllable, fragment of my subjectivity. Our life during my childhood was full of dogs – golden retrievers – and I think they provided me with a lot of the physical affection and love I was never able to feel from my mother. I found this account of a dream from a journal I was keeping over 30 years ago:

I'm sitting on the floor, the dog's soft panting head in my lap, its throat cut, its life blood pouring slowly away.

I didn't cut its throat, but I'm guilty and responsible in some way. [I certainly didn't fight to prevent it from being killed].



When I was about 20 my parents were forced to move from the big house I grew up in, because my Dad's business lost a lot of money. My mother had our two golden retrievers put down – because they were old and wouldn't survive the

move, she said. But I always thought the decision to get rid of them came from her bitterness about being forced out of the family home.

DOCUMENTARIES

The work I have done on myself in psychotherapy has opened up a range of perspectives on myself and my relationship with my mother – stories about me and her that I have told, in partnership with therapists I've worked with. This has also led to my appearing in two TV Documentaries – one last year and one in the mid 1980s – that used the work I have done on our relationship. I used extracts from both of them in the presentation.

First - with some trepidation and embarrassment – I showed a sequence from a Channel 4 series – *A Change of Mind* (Pick, Morrison: 1986) - made 17 years ago. Part of my interest at the time in appearing in the film was 'professional' - to experience being filmed rather than being the filmmaker, to experience the vulnerability of being a documentary subject, of surrendering my image to the control of another producer and director, to see – to recall Nicholls phrase - what it would be like to be part of the 'them' that the 'we' speak about³. In the sequence I showed I was working with Jenner Roth – a multi-disciplinary therapist who here was using a Gestalt technique to help me explore my distance from my mother, enabling me to scream and cry for her in a way that was profound and very moving. Afterwards Jenner described the therapy process as embodying lost parts of ourselves, literally

'Re-membering –gathering together the parts of ourselves ..'

It struck me how this presentation was a parallel attempt to gather together these parts of myself, to somehow try to make them cohere in the context of an audio visual narrative.

³ In retrospect, I remember feeling almost entirely oblivious of the camera during the shoot, as all subjects of 'fly-on-the-wall'/verité shooting are supposed to do.

Then last year Jenner was invited to gather a small group of men together to discuss their relationships with their mothers for a Discovery documentary that was to be shown on Mothers Day. I agreed to be part of it because I'd become involved by then in the issue of autobiographical film, and thought it would also contrast interestingly with the Channel 4 piece from the 1980s – which indeed it did. The Discovery piece – titled *21st Century Sons and Mothers* (Tysoe & Shuter: 2002) - featured celebrity interviewees such as Uri Geller and Neil Hamilton and commentary by various scientists and experts (including Oliver James) talking, for instance, about brain chemistry and Cortisol imbalances apparently caused by unsatisfying encounters with our mothers in early childhood. The tone of the programme was Horizon-style 'scientific' and my role (along with one or two other 'non-celebrities') in it was as an example – a kind of laboratory specimen - of a son bio-chemically damaged by the relationship with his mother.

Though I was much more vulnerable and exposed in the first film, it was interesting to me that my experience of being a subject in it was closer to collaborating with the filmmakers in a film 'speaking about me', whereas *21st Century Sons & Mothers* was more clearly 'us speaking to you about them'. Although I thought the programme itself was interesting and well put together, as a participant in it I felt more objectified, more emphatically one of 'them'⁴.

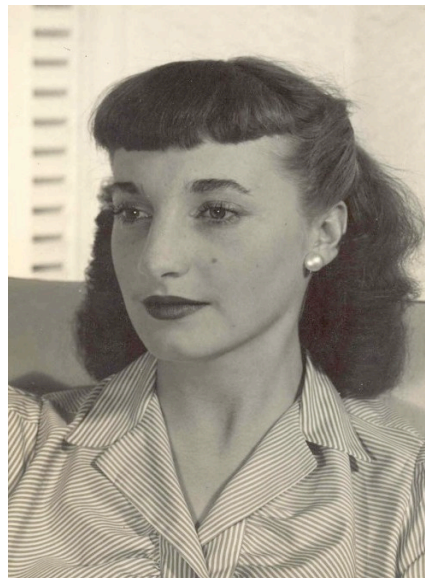
Then I returned to looking at the photos. I had started arranging the pictures in sequences, starting with the most recent, working back into the past. Studying the pictures of my mother and father together, I saw the complexity and disappointment of their later years, back through my childhood to the first few

⁴ This is also a comment on the history and changing styles of documentary on television – from 1980s observational Channel 4, to commentary-led, expository 21st Century Discovery Channel.

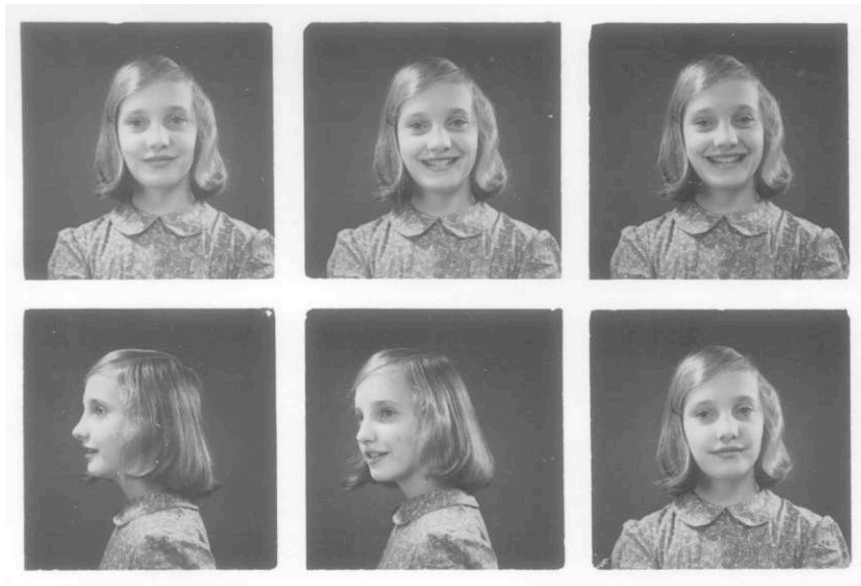
years of their time together, and finally this carefree and - to me - startlingly flirtatious picture from their courtship.



And then studying pictures of my mother on her own, individually back from her later, more unhappy years, back through the time of her parenting me, to before I'd been born and she was a young person with a whole future in front of her ..



⁵ I was puzzled by the laughter during my presentation when this image appeared on screen. It was the pig in the window, of course – so familiar to me from my childhood I barely noticed it.



When I look at these images of her as a child I have a contrasting feeling to that described by Barthes when he came across the Winter Garden Photograph of his mother when she was 5 with her brother:

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

And I found it. (Barthes: 1993 p67)

30 pages later he describes it as the only photo

which has given me the splendour of her truth .. a lost, remote photograph, one which does not “look” like her, the photograph of a child I never knew. (Barthes: 1993 p103)



The above photo is of my mother and her brother (not Barthes⁶) - at about the same age. In all these photos of my mother as '*a child I never knew*' I saw NOT the truth of her as I knew her in her life, but, I felt, a truth about her before her life (as I saw it) started to go so wrong – a person separate from me and my bad memories of our relationship. I'm aware that this is my fantasy about her adolescence and childhood, but for me it is corroborated particularly by these Polyfoto images. For the presentation I asked a colleague of mine at Goldsmiths – Jane Stobart – to animate them for me:



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

⁶ He famously refused to reproduce his photo in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes: 1993 p73)

The discussion that followed my presentation as I remember it was focused on the 'I/WE' question⁷: both the degree to which very personal material such as the above can be made to resonate with an audience, to be inclusive rather than solipsistic, and how this can be achieved. I didn't come up with any clear answers, but saw more clearly as a result of the discussion how the question of personal/ individual authorship and its social connectedness will be central to the work of my fellowship:

A single hand writes, but the self who inscribes, who is, is herself enmeshed with other lives which gives hers the meaning it has. (Stanley: 1992 p14)

A more specific question the presentation opened up was the issue of format and medium – following on particularly from the discussion earlier in the conference at Humphrey Trevelyan's talk on his installation⁸. Both the limitations of linear, one-screen presentation, and the research possibilities of both installations and more interactive digital media were explored. I took away a determination to experiment with DVD, partly as a way of representing the kind of exploratory, reflexive process I was aiming for in my presentation: showing a moving image text in a way that is more fragmented – from different subject positions – than a linear film can be.

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⁷ Raised by Jon Dovey among others, recalling my quoting Nicholls at the start of the paper.

⁸ Link?

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Tony Dowmunt – November 2003