

# Impressions of Me: Writing the Self on Film

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# Abstract

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This project explores ways of writing the subjective self on film. It is made up of a collection of short films presented in Korsakow (an interactive documentary system) and an exegesis discussing both the production process and the theoretical framework through which the films can be understood.

The work began as an investigation into subjectivity in the essay film. A spontaneous production method was used to better capture something authentic of the “self” on film. Because of this spontaneous method and the focus on the “self” as subject, the films began to resemble more readily the genre of the diary film.

The genre of the diary film has been used to highlight the fractured nature of the self through the production of short films and the repetition of the practice.

The methodology of poststructural autoethnography allowed for a deeper engagement with the significance of autobiographical films by acknowledging the impossibility of capturing the self.

Korsakow has been used to collate and present the films as a collection, whilst still maintaining them as individual units. The films can therefore be viewed in any order, reinforcing the idea of postructural theory’s fractured and fragmented self.



# Statement of Authorship

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This exegesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any tertiary institution, and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of this exegesis.

Signature

Date





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**A note to the Examiners:**

**The Korsakow project should be viewed prior to reading the Exegesis. The Exegesis is a supporting document and has been written with the presumption that the films have been viewed.**

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# Introduction

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*I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics, that is my physics.*

*-Michel de Montaigne (cited in Renov, 185)*

I began this year with an interest in exploring the role of the filmmaker in nonfiction cinema. I wanted to investigate subjectivity and the role of the filmmaker as conduit through which the audience experiences truth in film. However, my interest soon realigned to the more relevant theme of the essay film and the expression of personal subjectivity in film. I was interested in the potential for uninterrupted subjectivity offered by the essay film. As a genre it is separate, but related to documentary cinema. The essay film has a tendency to foreground personal subjectivity as a defining feature (Corrigan).

I began shooting short, spontaneous filmic experiments that were attempts at creating essay films. As I used myself as the subject, I found that my self-consciousness seemed to

hinder the veracity of the films. It was not “me” that was being presented, but a highly constructed, highly edited version of myself. So I developed a method of improvisation in order to short-circuit my own insecurities. The method was simple. Once I thought of an idea, the filming, voiceover and the editing were all done in quick succession leading to a more immediate impression of my personal thoughts and experiences.

Because the films were short and spontaneous they began to resemble more readily the close cousin of the essay film: the diary film. The method of production and the repetition of the practice (spurred on by a sudden thought or emotion) meant that I was focussing more on creating a series of films than on essayistic dimensions.

The fact that I was making multiple, separate films which focussed on ways of capturing the self mirrored the theories of poststructural autoethnography, which claim that any attempt to capture the self is flawed and fragmented. A more practical approach, therefore, to capturing the self is to acknowledge and embrace the multiplicity of selves which exist and eschew completely the idea of one, unified self (Gannon).

Because I was attempting to make diary films that reflected on precise moments I was left with a collection of films, that though related, had no systematic order or narrative. I wanted to preserve my collection as a whole, interconnected organism rather than as separate, disparate units. This meant that I needed a way to present them without imposing any hierarchy or chronology. For these reasons I chose to use Korsakow. As an interactive documentary system, Korsakow allows me to create unseen connection in the films, but does not dictate their ordering. This permits the viewer to navigate their own path through the films and does not privilege any particular ordering.



## CHAPTER 1

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# The Essay Film

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My research began as an investigation into the role of the filmmaker in documentary cinema then moved to the essay film because of its potential for representing subjective processes and everyday aesthetics. The essay film became the basis for much of my preliminary research. What interested me was the strong authorial voice and the literary history of the essay as an attempt to represent subjectivity. The essay film is similar to documentary cinema's performative mode (Bruzzi, Nichols) with its tendency towards highlighting the role of the filmmaker.

The key theories that define the essay as a cinematic form are the influence of the literary essay, the necessity of a strong authorial voice and the acknowledgement of subjective representation (Corrigan). The film essay is nestled within a strong literary tradition, which has informed both its structure and content (Alter). As with the literary essay, the essay film, privileges the role of the author as a convention (Lopate). Due to its rejection of traditional documentary

authority (Arthur, *Mind Over Matter*, Par. 4) the essay film has a tendency towards subjectivity.

The essay film is heavily informed by the literary history of the written essay. The word essay comes from the Latin word “*exagium*” (Rascaroli 23) meaning to weigh, to try, attempt or test, suggesting an “open-ended, evaluative search” (Alter 45). This tradition of testing and informal study has been translated into the essay film. The essay film is not an expression of fact, but rather an open-ended exploration of a topic. It is a trial with no certain outcome. This openness to experimentation is clearly visible in the modern essay film. For instance, in Agnes Varda’s *The Gleaners and I* (2002) the title cleverly identifies the subject of the film as both the gleaners and Varda herself. It is an essay on the concept of gleaning seen through Varda’s own predisposition to collect and collate video images. There is an interaction between self and the external world that, as Alter highlights, “incorporates, either by direct citation or visual reference, the words, theories and methods of Adorno, Lukács and especially Benjamin” (45).

In his book “*The Essay Film*”, Corrigan attempts to frame the modern essay film within the historical canon of essay practice, particularly the literary essay. Referring to the practice of Montaigne, Corrigan traces the similarities of the written essay and the film essay as those that describe “the intersecting activity of personal expression, public experience, and the process of thinking... (Corrigan 14).



Corrigan highlights Montaigne's penchant for ruminating on "common and uncommon questions picked almost haphazardly from a mind observing the world passing before and through" (13).

For me this is the point from which I dove into my project: a fascination with the role of the author/filmmaker as subject in film. One of the defining features of the essay film is its privileging of the authorial voice. Lopate, in his article "Searching for the Centaur", uses an old dictionary to define the essay as "a short literary composition on a single subject, usually presenting the personal views of the author" (American Heritage Dictionary qtd. in Lopate 19). Though this description skims over this complex literary form, its simplicity is useful in highlighting the role of the author within the essay. The essay is a form of personal expression, which relies upon the author for its shape and direction. It is imbued with the author's voice, "it tracks a person's thoughts as he or she tries to work out some mental knot, however various its strands, essay is a search to find out what one thinks about something" (Lopate 19).

The essay film's rejection of documentary authority (Arthur Mind Over Matter, Par. 4) allows it the freedom to represent subjective processes visually. Though essay films are often categorised as documentaries, their ability to embrace the subjective allows a much wider scope for experimentation. As Arthur suggests in his article "Essay questions from Alain Resnais to Michael Moore" the reason the essay film is so

free to experiment with subjectivity is that “essays confound the perception of untroubled authority or comprehensive knowledge” found in some traditional documentary modes (Mind Over Matter, Par. 4). Essay films attempt to represent one person’s beliefs or arguments and project this to the audience. The argument originates from the author not from a “transparent collective” (Arthur, Mind Over Matter, Par. 4). There is no silent acceptance that what is being seen comes from “a privileged, universal stance” (Arthur, Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg’s ‘Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene’, Par. 1). By discarding traditional notions of authority within the documentary mode, the essay film is ostensibly able to “hold up for scrutiny precisely those conventions that other documentary genres suppress” (Arthur, Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg’s ‘Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene’, Par. 3). Lopate agrees when analysing a tract from Marker’s film *Letter From Siberia* (1958). “Marker interprets the same footage three different ways, based on three separate ideological positions, demystifying with a light touch the spurious objectivity of documentaries” (20). This liberation from “spurious objectivity” allows an open acceptance of the authorial presence. The essay film is so intertwined with the author’s subjective thoughts and motivations that it could almost be seen as an autobiographical document (Rascaroli 23).

## CHAPTER 2

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# The Diary Film

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My work this year began in the realm of the essay film, but soon shifted to focus more specifically on the diary film as a mode of expression. Having its roots at the intersection of counter cinema, avant-garde and auteur filmmaking (Rascaroli 109), the diary film is autobiographical, temporal and iterative. Unlike the essay film it relies more heavily on the repetition of the practice to act, as a literary diary would, as a record of the filmmaker's life in certain moments. It reflects on the precise moment of its production and is often based around everyday experience and emotion.

*As is true of the literary genre, the diary film can be a repository of everything, of the banal as well as the momentous; it integrates public and private; it is capable of accommodating and not reconciling different stylistic registers, from the banal to the sublime... (Rascaroli 131)*

The diary film, as a mode of filmmaking, is intrinsically an expression of the everyday. It is an iterative practice

that relies on repetition and reflection. It captures the mundanity of life through repetition and a focus on the filmmaker's personal life and subjective viewpoints rather than a discussion of a specific subject or issue. It has been argued that the diary is "a practice caught in the banality of everyday existence" (Langford and West qtd. in Rascaroli 116), but I would argue that this does not fully recognise the potential for artistic merit present in capturing everyday existence. As MacDougall writes "We have certain ways of being human, but they are made concrete largely through their presence and reaffirmation in others" (MacDougall 29). There is something inherently beautiful about the recognition and expression of a commonality amongst humans. There exists a human curiosity for exploring what is normal and everyday. The diary is as Rascaroli writes "The quintessential work-in-progress, open and unstable, instantaneous and discontinuous by nature, the diary mixes high and low, both in stylistic registers and in subject matter..." (115). The diary film does not shy away from expressions of everyday life, of the banal, in fact it embraces it.

As with the essay film there is an acknowledgment that the diary film is grounded in the subjectivity of the filmmaker. This fact does not detract from the veracity of the film, but is celebrated. Mekas' films developed from a "...habit of photographing occasional fragments of his daily life" (James 18). The diary film is borne of the repetition of the action. It is the multiplicity of "entries" which make the films into diaries.

The diary film is a highly personal and autobiographical process which develops along side the filmmaker. In the late 1960s it became increasingly valued as a “practice of self-discovery, self-renovation and even as the place where the self might be constructed” (James 18). For my work this idea of using the diary film to construct the self is highly relevant. I am attempting to create an impression of my subjective self through this collection of films.

Just as with the essay film there is a strong focus on authorship in the diary film, it is the project of one individual expressing themselves;

*...a diary refers to writing the subject, who blatantly and persistently speaks in the first person, and who includes-along with the record of facts and events- her own impressions, ideas, sensations; her self-analysis; and her reflection on the act itself of composing a diary..(Rascaroli 116)*

Mekas writes of his diary films that “...as a group of images, it tells more about my own subjective reality, or you can call it my objective reality, than any other reality” (Mekas 193).

Bruss claims “there is no real cinematic equivalent for autobiography” (296) arguing that cinema is unable to express autobiography because “film lacks the capacity

for self-observation and self-analysis that we associate with language and literature” (298). Egan and Rascaroli, however, argue for “the possibility that film may enable autobiographers to define and represent subjectivity not as singular or solipsistic but as multiple” (Egan Par.1). This connects the literal fractured nature of my films to the metaphorically fragmented self as described by poststructural autoethnography.

## CHAPTER 3

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# Methodology

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## Poststructural Autoethnography

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In thinking about my filmmaking practice as research I explored possible methodologies that would aid in my understanding of the subjective self in relation to my research question:

**How can the production of first person diary films be used to explore ways of representing the autobiographical self on film?**

I came to poststructural autoethnography as a research methodology that reflected on aspects of the fractured self.

Autoethnography, as a research methodology and reflective literary tradition, can be applied to the practice of filmmaking to provide a greater understanding of autobiographical film. Autoethnography is a form of “self-narrative” placing the

self “within a social context” (Reed-Danahay 3). It is about contextualising one’s personal narrative within the cultural and political landscape to which one belongs. In my case this involved thinking about gender, the body and the social context of being a young woman. The expression of the underlying motivations of a work goes beyond traditional autobiographical practice in that it attempts to create films that engage more deeply with the conditions in which they are created. In this way it combines autobiography with ethnography. As Ellis et al define it :

*Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)...and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act (ADAMS & HOLMAN JONES, 2008) [sic]. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product.(Sec.1, Par. 1)*

Autoethnography reflects on both the process and the resulting artefact. This suits the way I work because it acknowledges the reflective aspects of the work and its impact on the evolution of the project. I do, however, find this definition to be rather narrow as it draws quite strict parameters about what autoethnography is and is not. However, it does highlight the main tenets of this approach to research. For me it is a manner of research that has allowed me to investigate and create my project with a better understanding of its wider implications. For example the film



'Reflection' is a literal reflection on the way my films might be viewed and interpreted by an audience. It has allowed me to include my reflection on the process as a valid part of the work.



**Fig 1. 'Reflection'**

My films sit within the realm of first person cinema. They are films that attempt to “articulate rather than occlude or suppress the position of the filmmaker” (Lebow 2). In a grammatical sense the ‘I’ in first person cinema can be seen to implicate the “we” (Lebow 3). The production of a film seems to invoke an audience as well as a cultural setting or context surrounding the work. As Lebow writes “the very act of communicating, whether writing or filming, implies an other...” (Lebow 3). The films I have been making are diary films. They are iterative, personal expressions of everyday elements of my lived human experience. They focus on

my thoughts, habits and emotions, and yet they inevitably implicate my own social context. For as Lebow writes of this type of film:

*...despite the fact that we believe it to express our individuality, it nonetheless also expresses our commonality, our plurality, our interrelatedness with a group, a mass, a sociality, if not a society. (3)*

What is depicted within the films is both a window into my life and a mirror reflecting the social context within which the work was created. There is a clear focus in my work on the body as representative of my self as a young woman. For Cixous the body is inextricably bound up in attempts at expressing the self. The physical body is a form of self-expression where “lived experience, memory, is stored in flesh and writing from memories unfurls from the body” (Gannon 490). The body emerged as an aspect of my self that I felt was not only worth expressing, but one that tended to dominate my own ideas of what defined me. There are films about my eyes, my hair, my tattoos, iron tablets, insomnia and insecurity all of which can be related to my body as a site of personal expression.



**Fig. 2 'Hair'**

My intention is to engage with the theories surrounding writing the self and to interpret my own motivations in creating these autobiographical films, rather than simply to document my experience. For this aim poststructuralist autoethnography, as explored by Gannon, is appropriate as it relies heavily on the philosophical questions of the possibility and impossibility of writing the self (474). Anthropological autoethnography “presumes the subjects can speak (for) themselves” whilst poststructuralist models “disrupt this presumption” (Gannon475-476). This methodology focuses on the “(im)possibilities of writing the self from a fractured and fragmented subject position” (Gannon 475). This suits my practice, as the films are literal fragments. They are not linked in any rational, methodological or chronological way. They are “partial, plural, incomplete, and contingent understandings”

(Denzin 8). Gannon focuses on the writing of poststructural philosophers Cixous, Derrida, Barthes and Foucault and their methods and attempts to write the self as:

*...unreliable and contradictory narrators who speak the self—the multiple selves that each of them is and have been—in discontinuous fragments informed by memory, the body, photographs, other texts, and, most importantly, other people. In different ways, they displace the speaking self that is the subject, object, and the (im)possible production of autoethnography. (491)*

The self-reflexive nature of autoethnography and the ability of poststructural theory to “foreground the limits and fragilities of self-knowledge”(Gannon 492) allow me to develop a better understanding of the complexities of subjectivity within my films. I am able to produce my films by foregrounding subjectivity and the impossibility of writing the self. This methodology intersects with first person cinema’s rejection of traditional documentary authority as Lebow writes “In the first person film, the filmmaker’s subjectivity is not only brought back into frame, it permanently ruptures the illusion of objectivity so long maintained in documentary practice and reception” (5).

By using poststructural autoethnography as a methodology to frame my practice, I am able to shift the focus away from

objectivity by acknowledging that each attempt to write the self is a contingent, partial understanding rather than representative of a conclusive whole. The awareness of the multiple, fractured self provides the ideal foundation for exploring the subjective self in all its contradictions. I am able to embrace the multiplicity of the self by foregrounding the shortcomings inherent in attempting to capture one's self on film. This methodology also offers the ideal metaphor for my short diary films as literal fragments of my "self". They are brief, splinters of footage. Each one is itself is fractured and incomplete. Some films focus on my anxiety about being construed as vain ('Bathroom Shelf' and 'Reflection') and yet others still focus on aspects of my vanity ('Eyes', 'Hair'). The representation these fragments create is somehow more honest because it is contradictory. The films depict the frustrating complexity of human nature, those aspects of insecurity, conceit and inconsistency.

**Fig. 3 'Bathroom Shelf'**



I have acknowledged and embraced the difficulty in capturing the self on film, yet I am satisfied that the films are accurate in so much as they provide an insight into my multiple and varied selves. Despite the inherent interference that occurs from the filmmaking process (the presence of the camera, the existence of an audience, etc). I am satisfied that the films, whilst embracing subjectivity, do impart an impression of my lived human experience.

Poststructural autoethnography is a practice grounded in self-awareness. The very act of filming or writing the self implies a conscious acknowledgement and investigation of the self, an analysis that is far from objective. As Gannon writes, "Ethnographic research, with its omissions, disguises, and representations of reality, has always been closer to the art of fiction than is often acknowledged..."(Gannon 477). This methodology recognises the part I play in constructing my own interpretation of my self. There are films that I decided not to include in my final work for fear that they were too personal or too compromising. There were also films that I felt unable to make. For instance, I wanted to make a film about my Buddhist upbringing, but shied away from this as it seemed too personal and complex a topic to cover in such a short film. It is an aspect of my life that I reflect on often, but it is quite personal. I did not want to leave my self open to criticism about oversimplifying or misinterpreting such a contentious topic.

There is no one aspect of an individual that will unlock the mystery of their being and yet I feel compelled to try to capture some sense of my self on film. For as Foucault writes

*Even in the deepest recesses of our psyches there are no experiences which, if evoked, will reveal our true identities. But the quest for the self is itself a form of self-care . . . we are condemned to a quest for meaning whose meaning is that our human nature is continually being reconstituted by the forms that we create along the way.*

*(Foucault qtd. in Hutton 140)*

Using poststructural autoethnography as the guiding methodology for the production of my films has allowed me to focus on what is possible for autobiographical film rather than what is not.

*The matter of knowing ourselves or coming to consciousness about ourselves is not only a central ontological question, ultimately unknowable yet endlessly surmised by philosophers, but it is also at the centre of the project of self representation. What is this self that is being represented and is the desire to represent this self (in language, through images) a formative one, constituting rather than re-presenting this self? Do we become ourselves and come to*

*know ourselves in the process of self-representation? Surely if this is the case, then the process of self representation is also constitutive of an illusion, that of the unified self, as it is obvious upon reflection that this act of representation itself implies a splitting...(Lebow 4)*

Lebow's acknowledgment of the flaws inherent in any proposal to "write the self" and the discussion of the fragmentary and partial nature of the "self" intersects with poststructural autoethnography. This methodology also coincides with my method of producing short films that, though related, do not create a cohesive narrative. They are connected, yet incomplete. The filmic fragments are not forced into false narratives, they do not build to a neat conclusion rather they point to an existence of the subject, in this case me, beyond the films. They acknowledge and underscore the messiness of life and human existence. For as Olsen writes life cannot be contained. It is inscrutable and contradictory:

*Life, though—standing on a street corner, channel surfing, trying to navigate the web or a declining relationship, hearing that a close friend died last night—flies at us in bright splinters (qtd. in Shields 113)*



Humans are complex, layered and frustrating beings that cannot be wholly captured within the confines of a film. My films are inadequate and incomplete fragments of fragments. There is a desire for creative practitioners to “keep looking at their own lives from different angles, keep trying to find new metaphors for the self and the self’s soul mate”, however, “We’re all guaranteed, of course, never to fully know ourselves, which fails somehow to mitigate the urgency of the journey” (Shields 152).

My films are attempts to reflect on aspects of my multiple selves on film. I am embracing subjectivity and allowing it to be the “filter through which the real enters discourse, as well as a kind of experiential compass guiding the work toward its goal as embodied knowledge” (Renov 176).



## CHAPTER 4

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# MacDougall's Fate of the Cinema Subject

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*A person I have filmed is a set of broken images; first, someone actually seen, within touch, sound and smell; a face glimpsed in the darkness of a viewfinder; a memory, sometimes elusive, sometimes of haunting clarity; a strip of images in an editing machine; a handful of photographs; and finally the figure moving on the screen, of cinema itself. (MacDougall 25)*

MacDougall's proposition is intriguing when considered from the perspective of my work. I am the 'someone actually seen', the subject, but I am also the filmmaker who creates the 'figure moving on the screen' from the footage. I live between these two worlds of construction and impression. I am at once the original subject captured in this set of broken images, the person capturing and manipulating the images and finally

the product of cinema itself. I am creating a persona on film, both through my behaviour as a subject and my desires as the filmmaker. I am aware of the role I take as a subject performing an impression of myself, but I am also in control of manipulating my own representation through the editing process. There is a disjunct between my desire to appear likeable (that of the cinema subject) and my desire to create an interesting film (that of the filmmaker).

Bruss argues that film is not an apt medium for autobiography because it is inherently a performative mode. Her assertion that “there is no ‘eye’ for I” (Bruss 298) attempts to highlight the contrasts between writing and film. This contention is based on Lejeune’s structuralist definition of the autobiography as “the identity of author, narrator, and protagonist, and involvement of the autobiographical pact” (Lejeune qtd in Gernalzick, Par.5). This definition fails to acknowledge the plethora of filmmakers whose work does not conform to such a narrow view of autobiographical cinema: McElwee, Varda, Mekas, Deren and Brakhage, to name a few. Such filmmakers seem to undermine Bruss’ argument and the definition of the “autobiographical pact”. Bruss’ argument can be seen to be “invalidated by the existence of filmic autobiographies, which are not acted but rather performed by the single-person filmmaker” (Gernalzick, Par. 5). Though I admit there are performative elements in the act of filming oneself, Bruss’ argument fails to acknowledge the self-inscription that occurs in the processes of filming. As Rascaroli writes “...the filmmaker can choose to signal his presence in the act of filming...a strategy

that equates a subjective camera with the filmmaker's consciousness" (8). The voiceovers in my films are almost stream of consciousness. The voice in my head uttered aloud. An insight into a mind, that though considered, is still spontaneous and representative of my lived human experience.

The performative aspects of first person cinema do not corrupt the autobiographical material's legitimacy, but rather lend it an honesty and an insight into the filmmaker's subjective self. For instance in Varda's short film *Oncle Yanco* (1967), she repeats a reenactment of her first meeting with her uncle several times. It is at once a highly stylised experiment and a witty commentary on the idea of objective truth in documentary. Varda highlights the farcical nature of presenting these types of encounters as unadulterated and unaffected by the presence of the camera. Instead Varda embraces the performative aspects of filming autobiographical content by repeating the scene over and over with variations. This not only highlights the elements of performance, but seems to reinforce the honesty of the footage. The scene is an insight into Varda's insecurity about meeting her uncle for the first time and the various ways she had imagined the encounter playing out.

In my films I am aware of the presence of the camera. I am self-conscious even though I am alone when filming. The presence of a recording device is enough to invoke an imaginary audience, silently judging and critiquing not only

the production, but my personality. Though the method of spontaneous production aids in minimising the impact of my self-consciousness, I am still actively constructing a persona for a hypothetical viewer. I am constantly making decisions about how to present myself, what to say, where to focus the camera and what to shoot. These are not arbitrary decisions but complex and sometimes unconscious thought patterns that are tightly bound up with notions of my “selves” and my desire to be liked by the audience. The awareness of a potential audience creates a self-consciousness that is bound to impact on the films’ veracity.

The aspects of playfulness and cinematic inventiveness that sprung from the production method are significant to me as they provide an insight into a separate aspect of my personality: that of using humour to overcome awkwardness. The humour is also a product of the films’ spontaneous production, there is no time for me to second guess myself. The films convey my self-consciousness and also my attempts to overcome this. In ‘Bathroom Shelf’ I am calculated. I spent an hour thinking of the shots, filming them and writing a voiceover that sounded both self-deprecating and sensible. This film seems to fall short in terms of capturing something raw or unadulterated. There is an overwhelming sense of self-consciousness. The humorous aspects of the films are all attempts for me to seem approachable and humble and to combat the inherent narcissism of making a project that revolves around myself.



**Fig. 4 'Reflection'**

I also faced problems and limitations in filming myself. For instance in the film 'Eyes' I had no choice but to use the auto-focus setting on the camera as I was unable to manually focus while filming so close to my face. I decided to use the movement to make my eyes go in and out of focus to represent the fading of my eyesight. The impetus to be creative is both inspiring and challenging. When editing the film 'Tattoos' I decided to abandon the voiceover I had recorded. I focussed instead on making the film a visual contemplation of the body without the interruption of a voiceover.

Because of the solitary nature of the method I am using I need to be creative in my use of the technology. I can only do what the camera will allow. A lot of the films used a locked off camera so that I was able to perform my movement or

behaviour in front of it. This was difficult in 'Tattoos', as one of my tattoos is behind my ear and I was therefore unable to tell whether it was in the shot or not as I turned myself away from the camera.

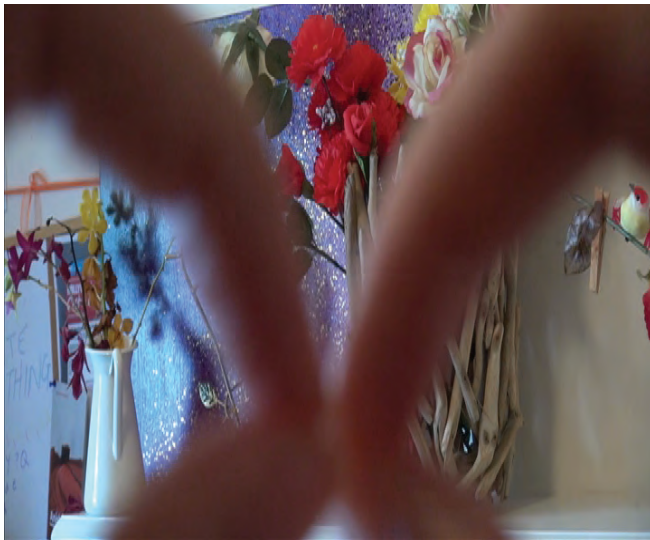


**Fig 5. 'Eyes'**

The technology has certainly allowed me to experiment with different ways of filming myself. I am able to manipulate and frame myself using the small viewfinder. I control what I film, at least to a certain extent. For Mekas the process of filming his diary films on his Bolex camera surely had less scope for creativity than I have with a compact sony NX CAM (Mekas, 90). I can easily transport it and it is lightweight enough for me to use on my own. I feel that as with Bosnian born filmmaker Nedzad Begovicz, "The filmmaker's precarious means, far from being a handicap to his storytelling, seem to



inspire him to ever greater heights of imagination" (New York film festival catalogue copy qtd in Shields, 154). My borrowed, compact camera and my lack of a crew or even a sidekick meant I was forced to experiment and be creative about the way I constructed each film. Rather than feeling limited by my small scale production I was able to film more freely and think creatively about the way I was presenting things.



**Fig. 6 'Eyes' (Glasses)**

Creativity becomes necessary in order to make the films worthwhile as visual expressions of the self. I did not want to simply film myself reading the voiceover to the camera. The point was not to make a video diary, but a diary film. I wanted the films to be expressive and engaging. The film

'Eyes' has a playfulness that resulted from its spontaneous production. The lack of planning meant that I was obliged to improvise. I moved my face towards the camera to bring my eyes into focus. I put my hands in the shape of eyeglasses in front of the lens. It seemed somewhat apt that this child like view of the world was created out of necessity rather than a methodical and elaborate storyboard. Likewise the visuals for the film 'Hair' demonstrate the difficulty of filming myself. My head shaking and movement in front of the camera is an attempt to inject humour into a fundamentally narcissistic exercise. I did not want to present myself as vain (even whilst discussing my vanity) so I made light of this strange fascination with my hair.

There is a blur between fiction and nonfiction within the diary film which allowed me to embrace the performative aspects of my films. I am aware of my position in relation to the camera as both subject and filmmaker and with this awareness comes a sense of self-consciousness that necessarily affects what is filmed. I am aware of the camera that I am controlling and manipulating in order to capture images of myself and yet I am also aware of myself being reflected back through the viewfinder. As MacDougall so aptly articulates, there is a disjunct between the subject viewed whilst filming and the subject that is created by the process of editing:

*The filmmaker sees the subject framed in two different ways: first through the viewfinder of the camera and later through the images on the film. The first view, although it may resemble the film image, is ontologically different from it, and different again from the image as it will seem, cut shorter and surrounded by other images, in the finished film. It takes place in an ephemeral zone in which life has yet to accumulate meaning and a future. The subject moves in and out of the miniature frame of the viewfinder, breathing the same air as the filmmaker and surrounded by the same objects and sounds. They await the same things- a door opening, unexpected arrivals and departures, the coming of night. In these moments, the subject's existence and the filmmaker's are closely interwoven. (MacDougall 29-30)*

The medium of film supports an immediacy that can be seen to alter the expression of personal or first person material. As "the self is created in film through the mediation of the process of narrative and symbolic representation..." (Turim qtd. in Rascaroli 8), the knowledge that an audience will view my autobiographical films can also present issues of honesty. In my work I had the unusual experience of being perfectly happy with my rough, imperfect films immediately after I had made them. However, as soon as I showed them to people, I began questioning every element of their production. What is interesting about this process is the dichotomy of working as both filmmaker and subject. I am in charge of constructing

a person from the footage, but that person is supposed to be me. Perhaps I am a less self-conscious subject because I am the only one present or perhaps the knowledge that I am able to edit out any aspects makes me more candid. What is clear is that there is a shift between the raw footage and the edited film. As MacDougall writes, for the filmmaker the film becomes a representation of the subject through the process of editing (28). As though the subject has been removed from the framework of real life and instead becomes an impression of themselves, a carbon copy, an imprint, not quite complete. My constructed and performed persona, no matter how unconscious, becomes the subject. I edit myself into film:

*A film sustains a hundred deaths and a hundred-and-one rebirths, but its last birth prepares a death of its own. The same images that come alive for the spectator are now already for the filmmaker gradually becoming representative. They may be the preferred images (although there are always regrets for things left out, defeated by the film's logic), but they are also only extracts from the more varied view of the subject that exists in the rushes... To the filmmaker, they look increasingly like film, not life. (MacDougall 28)*

Any attempt to state with any finality that these films are truthful representations of myself will inevitably fail. They are representations, fragments and impressions glanced as a reflection in a mirror or on the peripheries of vision.

## CHAPTER 5

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# The Diary Film in Practice

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Originally I set out to work within the form of the essay film (Corrigan, Lopate, Arthur, Alter), but through the process of filming, my project has shifted into the spectrum of “subjective cinema” towards the more personal mode of the diary film (Rascaroli 7). The diary film offers the filmmaker the opportunity for subjectivity and personal cinematic expression through a process that is both temporal and iterative. What began as a series of film experiments evolved into an exploration of my subjective self. Whether by design or necessity, what became important to me was the idea of communicating something of my subjective self authentically on film. The resulting films foreground myself as subject, they are attempts to express something meaningful about myself in a way that eludes contrivance and meddling. I wanted these films to feel raw, and in some way consistent with my understanding of my self and the complexities of lived human experience. My desire was to create visual expressions of

my thoughts and emotions with minimal intervention. For me this has manifested as a form of work that is extremely personal and introspective.

The films I have created all emerged from thoughts, emotions and relationships which I felt to be important. They are meditations on aspects of myself that wander from my hair to my relationship with my mechanic. When I began making these short experiments of films I set down the constraints within which I would work. The films would be personal, there would be no storyboarding or planning, as soon as the idea came I would film it, record a voiceover, and then immediately edit it. This method quickly emerged as significant in terms of what I was attempting to achieve. I was trying to capture something of myself, to write myself on film in a way that might avoid feeling contrived. The spontaneity of this practice allowed me an immediacy that, like that of American direct cinema (O'Farrell, Sec.2, Par. 1), endeavoured to avoid the filmmaker's penchant for interference by "capturing" things as they happened; to "film in a strictly observational, spontaneous style" (O'Farrell, Sec.2, Par. 1). Of course, this method would be fraught with problems if I was claiming to capture anything as contentious as "truth", but as subjectivity is my aim these issues hold less importance. I have no doubt that these films still represent something that is stylised and manufactured, but the immediacy of their production does impart a sense of authenticity.

I came to the diary film as a genre because it suited my method of production. The diary film is able to highlight the reflective aspects of first person filmmaking and its potential for representing the everyday. My method of spontaneous production was important as a way to circumvent my self consciousness. Though I began my work with the intention of making an essay film, the process by which I was creating my films was much more closely aligned with that of the diary film. The quick production meant that my practice suited the genre of the diary film, with a focus on the production method, repetition and reflection. These short films all reveal something about my autobiographical self and the way I perceive the world. They are expressions of what Burgess terms “vernacular creativity” (Burgess iii). This idea of “the everyday practice of material and symbolic creativity...” (Burgess iii) is what instills these films with meaning as playful experiments. They are everyday expressions of “self”. I am attempting to create autobiographical material that is spurred on by a thought and emotion rather than an event.

First person cinema, like the diary film, tends to reject traditional objective documentary authority and foreground the subjectivity of the filmmaker (Lebow 5). My work fits into this category of films that are “foremost about a mode of address: these films ‘speak’ from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position” (Lebow 1). My position as narrator, filmmaker and subject clearly convey my subjectivity as the frame through which everything is viewed. In the diary film there is a potential not only for personal expression, but for variation, for

development of the practice and for the films to truly reflect on the exact moment of their production. For these reasons I chose to use the diary film as a form to move forward with as it reflects on aspects of the multiplicity of self and capturing precise moments that interested me. The diary film provides a framework that allows my work to be viewed as connected as a series of entries, despite being created as multiple, individual films.

The iterative nature of this process of making films allowed my work to develop and change throughout the project. My filmmaking progressed as I became more comfortable with the method of production and as I reflected on my practice. I became more confident in my own voice and began experimenting with more creative uses of the medium. The film 'Bathroom Shelf' was the first in this series of experiments and reflects this in its naivety. The humour falters because of the self-conscious delivery of the voiceover. This is not so much about the content as me testing the waters. I am trying to find my voice, to express my thoughts; I am openly insecure about what I am saying. I allowed myself too much time to think about what I was doing and thus dispelled the aspect of spontaneity that has allowed me the confidence to make the other films. The iterative aspects of the diary film revolve around "...serial, spontaneous composition of some regularity..." (James 20). It is this process of production and reflection that has allowed my work to evolve and for me to develop a strong authorial voice. Diary films develop and mutate alongside the filmmaker. It is a temporal medium as it relies on repetition of the practice.



These films stem from the thoughts and emotions that arise from the experience of everyday life. They are fragments that emerge, as Mekas writes, in bits, as they happen (191). They build on one another, they mutate, split, change, develop and grow. There is a clear development in the style of the films. Whether it came from increased confidence or reflections of my mood at the time, this evolution demonstrates the beauty of the iterative nature of the diary film. The films reflect on a precise period, emotion or moment. Some of the later films such as 'Tattoos' and 'Painting' do not have voiceovers. They are simply quiet reflections, breath breaks in the midst of a cacophony of voices.

**Fig.7 'Tattoo'**



The diary film is able to focalise the “autobiographic self; by the collapsing of the roles of author/narrator/protagonist” (Rascaroli 128). This kind of compression integrates well with my method of filmmaking, which has so far encompassed a camera, a tripod and me. I am producing filmic fragments based on spontaneous thoughts or emotions. This quick editing process seems to make the diary elements of the films all the more relevant as it escapes the “double temporality” (Cuevas 57) that accompanies many diary films that are filmed and then edited at a much later stage. My films could therefore be seen to be more closely related to the literary diary in that I am writing the thoughts as they occur.

I like that the films reflect on the “self” that exists in the precise moment of production. The diary film is able to capture and reflect on the beauty of the everyday because of the repetitive nature of its production. It is a practice bound up in the idea of consistent repetition in order to capture something of lived human experience. For example, the film ‘Soup’ is included twice in the project to highlight this idea of the everyday, once with the voiceover and once without. The film is an expression of a raw emotion: the sadness I felt on the day and my failure to overcome my feelings of inadequacy. I wanted to make a film about my depression, but I only managed to make soup. Somehow the mundanity of the visuals juxtaposed with the seriousness of the voiceover is a much more honest expression of depression than I might have otherwise made. It is not me reflecting on moments in my life which have passed, but a literal reflection of my feelings as they are occurring. I think the repetition of the

film also highlights just how loaded and significant these reflections on the everyday can be. For me the film without the voiceover still conveys the sombre mood of the situation and the voiceover simply explains the circumstances which were playing out in my head. Mekas highlighted the impetus for employing the diary film as: “the need to respond immediately with the camera to and in the present, and the need to inscribe subjectivity by the creation of a personal style in shooting” (21).



**Fig.** **“soup** **8**

For Mekas, it was the lack of time to reflect and make his own creative work that led him to make diary films. For me it was the desire to avert my own inhibitions by making the films as quickly as possible. Seemingly my discovery of the diary film came about as a serendipitous development. The films I had begun to make were short, personal reflections that needed to be contextualised in relation to their method of production. In ‘Diary Film’, whilst describing the work

that produced both *Diaries Notes and Sketches* (1969) and *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972), Mekas explains a rather suspiciously similar set of pressures which led to his use of the diary film as a form: "I did not come to this form by calculation but from desperation" (Mekas 190). The spontaneous production became so significant to me that it began to define my work. As in the essay film there is also a clear allusion to the subjectivity inherent in the first person cinema. "Mekas's diary films are clearly grounded in autobiographical practice, a frontier area where fiction and non-fiction conflate" (Cuevas 54). This highlights the blur present in the diary film between the representation of the filmmaker's reality and the subjective view offered by such personal reflection.

For me the diary film form acted as a confessional medium, allowing me to voice my concerns and acting as a diary would, as a place to reflect and voice my inner thoughts. For instance, when I reflected on the film 'Iron' I realised the film had acted as a cathartic admission. It was less about the actual tablet and more about my desire to vocalise my frustration at such a pathetic foible.



**Fig.9 'Iron'**

*At first I thought that there was a basic difference between the written diary...which is a reflective process, and the filmed diary. In my film diary, I thought, I was doing something different: I was capturing life, bits of it, as it happens...When I am filming, I am also reflecting... (Mekas 191)*

By embracing the diary film as a mode of expression I am investigating ways of writing the autobiographical self on film that allow me to reflect and contemplate on personal thoughts and emotions.



## CHAPTER 6

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# Fragments

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As diary films my work this year has relied on the repetition of the practice. My method of spontaneous production meant that the diary films I have created are short reflections on precise moments. To this end the films are only fragments of between thirty-seconds and one minute in length. The work I have produced is a group of small units connected by subject and method, but not by any clear chronology or narrative. The films are all equal and meaningful as stand alone artefacts and yet they belong together. Each film represents an element of myself that I have chosen to try and express through film. It therefore seems futile to enforce any sort of hierarchy or to make value judgments about which films are most important. Viewed as a whole they form a somewhat blurry, slightly contradictory picture of my multiple selves. As James acknowledges, the diary film focuses more on its multiplicity than on itself as a complete entity:

*...a diary made in film privileges the author, the process and moment of composition, and the inorganic assembly of disarticulate, heterogenous parts rather than any aesthetic whole. (James 16)*

It is this assembly of “disarticulate, heterogenous parts” that concerns me. It became clear that I needed to present the films so that they were connected in a way that both acknowledged their interrelatedness as a collection and maintained them as individual units in their own right. Grouping or editing them together into a linear narrative form undermined their equity. As Manovich writes, each unit of film has the same value so trying to impose a sequence onto them would undermine this equality (39). For these reasons I decided to pursue the idea of a database narrative using Korsakow.

Database narratives rely on database logic (Luers, Database Logic, Par.1) as theorised by Manovich:

*Many new media objects do not tell stories; they don't have a beginning or end; in fact, they don't have any development, thematically, formally, or otherwise, that would organize their elements into sequence. Instead they are a collection of individual items, where every item has the same significance as any other. (39)*

Miles has written on the very conundrum I faced when compiling my films as “how to make something whole from smaller fragmentary parts where, in both cases, these



fragments are already whole". Miles theorises that the problem posed by database narratives stems from anxiety surrounding the fragmentary nature of such films. Traditional cinema is a "relational media" which arranges "relations between shots and sequences into fixed, closed sets"(Miles). The difference with database narratives and interactive systems is "the maintenance of these relations as open sets after the fact of 'publication'"(Miles). In database narratives the ordering of the shots and their relations are not important (Miles). Korsakow allows the films to exist as a collection, whilst still maintaining them as individual artefacts with no set ordering. The sequencing then falls to the viewer as they move through the films in their chosen order.

Although diary films often focus on a strict chronology of the events depicted, my films focus more on the precise moment of their production. My films were created in response to emotions or thoughts rather than the cataloguing of events. They have less to do with a literal chronology of their production and more to do with being a representation of lived human experience. Each film could have been shot in any order as the emotions or thoughts could have occurred at any time. They are not trying to depict a series of events, but a series of fragments of my multiple selves. For this reason I have chosen to use Korsakow to allow them to be viewed randomly rather than ordering them chronologically. The point of the project is to demonstrate the fractured nature of my self on film and I feel that this is a more logical way to depict this.

There is a human desire to create narrative from arbitrary images which can be exploited in a database narrative. As Shields writes “The absence of plot leaves the reader room to think about other things” (114). In Korsakow the viewer is unconstrained by concrete ordering and conventional plot and story tropes. There is no limitation of sequence or structure because each film is considered an equal unit, with an equal likelihood of being selected by the viewer. The lack of set narrative or chronology means that the viewer is free to draw their own conclusions about what the films mean.

As Luers writes, for database narratives to be effective they must mimic lived human experience rather than invoking false narratives for the sake of the viewers’ comprehension:

*For database narratives to find their natural “story” forms, authors and artists must look at how the database is lived in everyday life. There are no central conflicts, heroes and villains, winners and losers, in database logic. There are certainly competing narratives, but there is no center, no central character and no final moment of catharsis. There are only relational events and the narratives of moving through them. (Luers, Vernacular Database Narrativity, Par. 3)*

In Korsakow “Narrative emerges as an effect of navigation” (Luers, Diagrammatic Narration). As with the Kuleshov

effect where “Meaning and emotion were created not by the content of the individual images but by the relationship of the images to one another” (Shields 115), the juxtaposition of films within Korsakow allows the viewer to construct their own impression of me as they move through the project. This model of creating and implying meaning through editing can be damaging in nonfiction film as it attempts to force material into narrative structures. However, it can be used to the filmmaker’s advantage in database narratives. New meanings can be created depending on the way the viewer navigates through the films:

*...it is ultimately the cognitive and emotional investment of the receiver of plot — the subjective associations, desires, visualizations, decodings and fast searches — that transforms a mere series of selected details into a story network that is always more than the sum of its parts. (Luers, Missing Data, Par.1)*

The process of editing film often revolves around trying to fit the film into a standard narrative arc of beginning, middle and end. Macdougall in “The fate of the cinema subject” outlines the trend in documentary cinema towards sacrificing the inconsistencies and complications of lived human experience for story or plot:

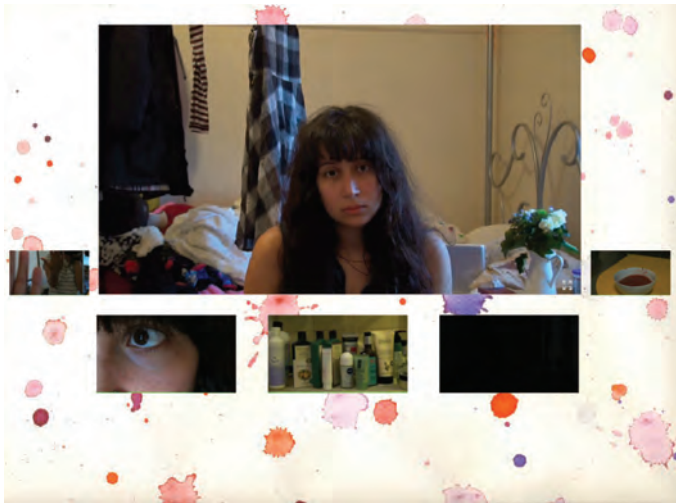
*If some documentary filmmakers seem complacent about their work, many others, I suspect, are engaged in a secret struggle with their films: with the immediacy that hides a hundred evasions, with the luck that looks like forethought, with the skill that produces its predictable effects. Perhaps most keenly they feel the stifling domestication of film, which by its naming and cossetting of life shields the viewer from the very things they are meant to discover.*  
(MacDougall 27)

This kind of narrativisation attempts to organise elements of a subject into a recognisable form that adheres to traditional narrative conventions. I do not want to create an impression of myself that is tidy, complete or recognisable. I am complex and contradictory and I want the structure of my project to reflect this. “ A mosaic, made out of broken dishes, makes no attempt to hide the fact that it’s made out of broken dishes, in fact it flaunts it” (Schnabel qtd in Shields 116). Korsakow seemed the ideal software to subvert this tendency for narrativisation, as it is able to maintain the independence of the films whilst collating them in one space.

Korsakow allows the filmmaker to create connections which link films using key words. Each film is given an “In keyword” and an “Out keyword”. The in keyword is used to describe the content of the film (ostensibly what it is about). The out keyword dictates the films that appear as previews for the viewer to select from. The out keywords are the connection

the films are searching for. The interface is designed and the connections preordained, but the viewer still has the ability to navigate through at their own pace and in their own direction. I have chosen to use a start film and an end film to create some semblance of cohesion as a collection, but the films in the body of the work can appear in any order. In my Korsakow project each film only appears once. Because each film is addressing a specific issue or aspect of my “self”, I felt that the viewer should only view it once.

**Fig. 10 Korsakow Interface with Previews**



The key words I used in my project seem to convey a lot about the content of the films and also perhaps something about the way I view myself. The words I used were: vanity, body, relationships, love, habit, insecurity, sadness, family,

and reflection. These words provide a synopsis of the films content and allow for some design as to the way each film interacts within the project. Taking the notion of Granularity as Miles writes:

*Granularity allows us to recognise that each shot [film] is able to offer many possible connections, or facets, by which they can be addressed and, in turn, which they can address to others. (Miles)*

Each film has multiple possible connections to other units, which creates the potential for multiple interpretative paths in a database narrative. “Each film is an independent entity and have at any one time multiple possible connections which are only made concrete when they are selected by the viewer” (Miles). Within the context of Korsakow I have created a structure through my use of connections, which creates “contours” in the work, reducing “the larger set of possible connections to those that are thought to matter” (Miles). So though the viewer creates the order the films are viewed in, the filmmaker is still able to highlight connections that they deem important within the project. This enabled me to create connections based on keywords that I felt linked and defined the films, but still allows the project an openness and the opportunity for interactivity.

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# Conclusion

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*Every man's work- whether it be literature or music or pictures or architecture or anything else-is always a portrait of himself.*

*(Butler qtd. in Shields 157)*

The aim of my work this year was to explore ways of writing the self on film, to examine the potential of the diary film for representing something authentic of my lived human experience.

The methodology of poststructural autoethnography, helped me gain a greater understanding of the impossibility of the task of capturing the self. Instead of focussing on capturing something as fragile as “truth”, my films attempt to play on the notion of the multiple possible identities of the self. They focus on presenting my subjective and multiple selves in ways that are honest and authentic.

This idea of the fragmentary nature of the self serves as an apt metaphor for the actual nature of my films. They are fragments or glimpses into a select few aspects that I have chosen to focus on. The films do not attempt to express the entirety of my being, they provide an elliptical, sideways glance over my multiple selves. The films are also fragmented, as they do not capture the whole of any aspect of my personality, but rather provide a brief, passing moment of insight, a meditation on myself that is not quite developed.

My production method involved ignoring traditional filmmaking conventions of storyboarding, concept development and planning, in order to capture something of my lived human experience. Once the films were complete it felt wrong to meddle with them, to reshoot or edit beyond the original. In this way I feel these fragments of film have succeeded in capturing something authentic of myself. To me this seemed the most honest and effective way to capture aspects of myself. The spontaneity of the practice allowed me to explore topics and emotions in way that I felt avoided my penchant for over thinking and the raw aspects of the films seemed to add to their veracity.

I began with an interest in exploring the concept of subjectivity in film through the production of an essay film. My desire was to represent a sense of personal subjectivity on film: to provide a personal insight into a given topic. However,



as I began producing films it became clear to me that my production method was becoming increasingly important. Through a process of reading and research I settled on the diary film as a form that suited my desire to capture myself in short fragments spurred on by thoughts or emotions. The diary film's iterative process and focus on regular repetition of the practice suited my spontaneous production and short fragments of films.

Throughout the production of my films I have maintained an awareness of my own motivations and desires and have attempted to fracture the perspective that what I am doing is not contrived. Of course it is a construct, reliant on my desire to present myself in a certain way. I edit myself both as the self-conscious subject and the concerned filmmaker. As Dorst writes "the impulse for self-documentation and the reproduction of images of the self pervade our everyday practice" (qtd. in Reed-Danahay, 8).

I have investigated ways to express and write my subjective self through short, spontaneous diary films and to present these in a manner that allows them to be viewed as a whole rather than fragments. Korsakow allows for the compilation and assembly of these films into a larger series, which allows them to be viewed as a whole and also as individual units relating to one another. Korsakow gives the films a context beyond just "'me" here writing "my story"' (Gannon 475); these stories can be expressed as "reflexive, critical, multimedia tales and tellings" (Denzin 26).

Because subjectivity was my aim it is difficult to say whether my project has been successful or not. What is evident is that I am proud that the films I made communicate something authentic of my multiple selves. My creative practice has been informed by the many theoretical and practical approaches to filmmaking I have discussed. I have developed production methods that I feel lend my films both creative freedom and a sense of honesty.



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