PUBLIC INTIMACY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF FIRST--PERSON DOCUMENTARY

By PATRICIA AUFDERHEIDE

Using the camcorder she got from MTV for its "Unfiltered" segment, a determined young woman chronicles the student movement she marshaled to stop harassment of women on a college campus. On public TV, a brain-damaged man charts his experience of disability with family, friends, bureaucrats and employers, with the help of an experienced video producer. On Nightline, a journalist recounts his experience of living under the U.S. embargo for a week in a small Haitian village.

First-person video storytelling, fueled more every year by the flood of camcorders into the marketplace, is beginning to emerge as its own genre, somewhere in between the essay, general reportage and the well-told tale.[1] It is marked not only by the first person voice in testimonial, but also by the bringing of the viewer into the world of the storyteller's experience. Often socially engaged, it is rarely polemical. Indeed, it typically does not make a direct argument, but an implicit request for the viewer to recognize the reality of the speaker, and to incorporate that reality into his or her view of the world.

Such work, whose compelling quality is the drama of its storytelling, crosses the makeshift line between journalism/public affairs and culture/art/fiction. As it becomes a minigenre of its own, it stands both as symptom of and response to the challenge of social location in a postmodern society.

The first-person documentaries that have burgeoned over the last few years have developed in several ways and styles. There is the confessional video, a first-person diary or meditation, drawing on a long history of independent and art film. Collaborative efforts between artists and otherwise disenfranchised voices use the strategy of social activism through documentary. First-person or Op-Ed style journalism, through the portability and quality of smallformat, brings to video the well-established (and often leftwing or socially-activist) print genre of first-person reporting and opinion.

This kind of work is part of a much broader social movement that blurs the lines between public and private life. It arises in the same media era that has

seen on broadcast commercial television the rise and pervasive reach of the tabloid news show and the confessional talk show format, the boom in web sites devoted to personal diaries and mainstream newspaper and magazine reports that put the private lives of public figures under a microscope.

Personal-essay documentary has become a popular form in American independent cinema. It is now the dominant style of documentary submitted to the highest-visibility showcase today for independent film--the Sundance Film Festival.[2] In 1995 the festival even created discussion panels and a film series to highlight and analyze its popularity. Family Name (1997), in which filmmaker Macky Alston, scion of a Southern family with plantation roots, searches for the "other Alstons," black descendants of Alston slaves, won an award at the 1997 Sundance Festival.

The first-person saga has become a feature of venues once identified as feisty bastions of left-wing perspectives. The public TV series P.O.V., established by leftist film advocate Marc Weiss to feature partisan filmmaking, has become a showcase over the past 10 years for the personal-essay documentary. Its 1997 season features two notable memoir films: Alan Berliner's Nobody's Business (1996), the third in his trilogy of family history, focuses on his reluctant father; Judith Helfand's A Healthy Baby Girl (1997) recounts the cost of cancer related to DES, a pregnancy drug, in her own and her family's life. P.O.V. now proudly identifies itself as a place to discover "America's storytellers." The San Francisco-based Independent Television Service (ITVS), the product of a decade of struggle by the same kinds of filmmakers that Weiss fought for, saw the category of personal or diary proposal rise to become the largest single category by 1993, or a sixth of the total, with the trend continuing until subjective filmmaking became a prize-winning, dominant category of ITVS production.[3] The list of Women Make Movies, the feminist distributor of independent films and videos (and a co-funder and distributor of A Healthy Baby Girl), is dominated by personal-essay documentaries, including recent releases such as lesbian filmmaker Su Friedrich's gentle group reminiscence of lesbian girlhood, Hide and Seek (1996) and Ruth Ozeki Lounsberry's part-mockumentary speculating on her grandmother's life, Halving the Bones (1996).

Personal film and videomaking has even established some classic titles and producers. African American filmmaker Marlon Riggs's video poem on his coming to terms with his homosexuality, Tongues Untied (1989), came to public awareness when controversy erupted over P.O.V.'s slating of the film

nation-wide.[4] Ross McEIwee's journal portraits of self-discovery and questing, culminating in Time Indefinite (1993), have become cult films for aspiring filmmakers searching for a voice both tentative and assertive.

The makers of these first-person films, mostly middleclass professional filmmakers, go on journeys of discovery, often triggered by medical crisis--AIDS, Alzheimer's disease, brain damage, bulimia, mental illness--or by a family crisis. Accidents of fate or birth trigger an exploration of social identity, as a way of making meaning from events. The camera becomes not just a recorder, but an assistant in the construction of reality. In Sherman's March (1991) McEIwee says, and he claims it is only partly injest, "It seems I'm filming my life in order to have a life to film."[5] His camera gives him a social role to play. Berliner uses the camera to reinterpret family history in Nobody's Business: "[T]he more [my father] articulated his own ordinariness, the more motivated I became to prove him wrong. To attempt to give his life a new meaning, if not for him, then at least for me."[6] Helfand, in A Healthy Baby Girl, treats it as an aid to connect her story to larger ones. As she says in the film, "We've learned as a family that the camera is our friend. The camera is a moral conscience, a reminder, a witness for history, that we are not alone, this is not our problem alone...My cancer is the result of a calculated business risk."

The spurs to self-investigation, and to the location of personal saga in a larger context, are many. Helfand's personal tragedy is a stark example. In Janice Tanaka's Who's Gonna Pay for These Donuts, Anyway? (1993), a long-delayed reunion between the director and her father is also a rediscovery of the World War II internment of Japanese Americans as family history, and aM eloquent metaphor for larger social loss. Barbara Bader's Beautiful Piggies (1995), about her eating disorder and family life; Peter Friedman's Silverlake Life (1993), the diary chronicle of a gay couple dying of AIDS; Allie Light's Dialogues with Madwomen (1993), portraits of several women who survived mental illness; Marco Williams's In Search of Our Fathers (1993), which investigates the role of women in maintaining the African American family through his search for his own father; Ellen Spiro's Greetings from Out Here (1993), a diary film of a road trip in which Spiro, a lesbian, visits gays and lesbians living in Southern communities; Billy Golfus and David Simpson's When Billy Broke His Head... and Other Tales of Wonder (1995), where Golfus, who suffered brain damage in a motorcycle accident, struggles to find ways to rejoin society and understand disability as a social category; Mark Pellington's Father's Daze (1994), a

meditation on his relationship with his father who has Alzheimer's; and Deborah Hoffman's Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter (1994), which tracks the evolution of her relationship with her mother as the mother slips into the dementia of Alzheimer's, all construe intimate experience as relevant to a public discussion.

Another kind of first-person documentary is made by people who are rarely seen on television and who do not by themselves have the skill or resources to tell their own stories. For instance, Boston Globe journalist John Koch worked with seven groups or local teenagers to make an hour-long, seven-part tape reflecting their daily lives, In Our Own Words (1995), shown simultaneously on three local TV stations, one of them public. The eight-part, four-hour ITVS series The Ride (1994) involved seven teenagers from all over the country, who traveled to several states and interviewed other teenagers about their lives; they worked with an executive producer, trainers and editors. Veteran filmmaker Ilan Ziv has worked with non-filmmakers in the Middle East to create pieces such as Palestinian Diaries (1991), where video diaries were kept by several Palestinian families; Family Scenes, Stones and M16s (1991), which documents video diaries kept by Jewish settlers during the same time and, along with Peter Kinoy, Teen Dreams (1995), which deals with at-risk American teenagers. Filmmakers Ahrin Mishan and Nick Rothenberg lived with Vietnamese immigrant teenager Ricky Phan, a gang member, for two years before composing his first-person story, Bui Doi Life like Dust (1994). Spencer Nakasako worked closely with Cambodian high school student Sokly Ny to produce a diary of his senior year, a.k.a. Don Bonus (1995).

Some journalists have found first-person storytelling a uniquely compelling way to communicate other realities. Danny Schechter and Rory O'Connor, coproducers of the series South Africa Now and a new human rights series, Rights and Wrongs, have often used partisan correspondents and first-person, grassroots storytelling. Their compilation of works by the Sarajevo film collective SAGA, Sarajevo Ground Zero (1993), featuring what they called "first-person perspectives of people under attack," won film festival awards and aired on cable channel Cinemax (after PBS, obviously uncomfortable with personal journalism, passed on it).

First-person journalism on video has, in fact, long been a marginal but significant part of commercial television news. Independents such as Jon Alpert and Alan and Susan Raymond have staked a claim for the legitimacy of first-person journalism, and Nightline has featured the diary work of

freelance journalist David Turecamo. MTV's "Unfiltered" segments, the storefront videoboxes used by viewers to communicate with and participate in Toronto's Citytv (which borrowed the idea from Britain's Channel 4 and has since inspired U,S. programmers to do the same)[7] and the viewer "Talkback" segments featuring camcorder viewer comments on P.O.V. extend this phenomenon.

Subjective, personal-essay style documentary has become a distinct form internationally. In 1990 the British Broadcasting Corporation began a weekly series, Video Diary, each episode featuring a different person's story. (Although the videos are made independently, the makers work closely with BBC producers.) The show has become so popular that Teenage Diaries was inaugurated in 1992. Intimate, first-person filmmaking has been a hallmark of new-wave diasporic cinema, including that of the African cultural diaspora. Guinean David Achkar's Allah Tantou (1991), about his quest for an understanding of his diplomat father's life and death; Raoul Peck's Lumumba: Death of a Prophet (1992), in which his own childhood memories and home movies are interwoven with the early national history of Congo/Zaire; Ngozi Onwurah's Body Beautiful (1991), about her own self-image as seen through the life of her white mother; and the body of work by Isaac Julien, a leader in the Black British filmmaking community, all confront controversial issues of social identity through personal experience.[8]

Subjective, first-person documentary will continue to grow, if the enthusiasm for weekend workshops hosted by the American Documentary, which produces P.O.V., for aspiring personal filmmakers in 1994-1995 is any guide.[9] Hundreds of people applied for the 15-20 spaces available in each of five workshops, part of the development process for a forthcoming public TV series, E.C.U. ("extreme close-up").[10] These were not first-time filmmakers, by and large, but experienced producers who wanted to use camcorder technology as a tool for self-expression.

Hopeful filmmakers said they wanted to make their films for two related reasons. One was to assert their own place in the world, and chronicle their discovery of that place. One applicant aptly quoted an independent filmmaker, Kit Carson, who in the mockumentary David Holtzman's Diary (1967) says: "Godard once said that film is truth 24 times a second, so I thought that if I filmed my life, I might be able to understand it." They often wanted to make stories about their own families, exploring relationships through rupture. Story ideas included one about a lesbian's relationship with

her father, a right-wing activist; a profile of a Jewish family divided by religious belief; a portrait of a mentally ill father; and another about coping with a disturbed mother. They often saw the camera as an ally that would permit them to ask questions they otherwise could not ask.

Another way of saying what they were doing was to give social context to individual experience. Whether it was a daughter following her mother through the first year of retirement, a wife facing widowhood, a neighbor tracing community relationships through a yard sale, a Latino tracing three generations of searching for the American dream, an African American woman charting repressed anger in the workplace or a father chronicling life with a Down's syndrome child, they wanted to make connections with smaller and larger publics. One filmmaker called it "bearing witness," another called it countering "distorted and sensationalistic" media images. Several said they wanted to show the human face of an issue such as AIDS or aging or youth violence.

However diverse their impulses, all undertook their projects as efforts to make public an experience that they felt had been rendered invisible by the profit imperatives of mass media, by social discrimination, or both. They consciously aimed to expand the range of voices and experience represented on screen. They consciously or unconsciously demonstrated a tension between the social and commercial functions of mass media, particularly television, whose small screen was for them a powerful interpreter of reality.

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL

The personal documentary has tangled roots in several traditions. Disenfranchised social groups and their supporters have long used documentary to communicate directly their point of view to a broader audience--often with a pointed political objective. This was the premise of the Challenge for Change project, in which Canada's National Film Board gradually evolved a collaborative production process between filmmakers and social actors and activists.[11] The power of documentary to promote social justice has been the premise of several groups that work in video with teens or disenfranchised groups, such as Educational Video Center in New York and PRIDE in Philadelphia. The same premise fueled the social issue documentary movement of the 1970s, with its oral histories portraits of the American left such as With Babies and Banners (1977) and Union Maids (1976). That faith in media's power to change society has been part of the rhetoric of cable access television.

The evolving tradition of cinema verite has also focused on the subjective

expression of social issues. The very different works of Fred Wiseman, the Maysles brothers and Kartemquin Films[13] has brought the powers of close observations to social institutions and processes. Kartemquin's widely-praised feature Hoop Dreams (1994), partly funded by public television, uses the intimate daily life of two families to tell a saga of doomed pursuit of the American dream.

In the 1970s, experimental film artists--Robert Frank, Alfred Guzetti, Jeff Kreines, George Kuchar, Curt McDowell, Jonas Mekas, Ed Pincus--used diary and confessional film as oblique social commentary.[14] At the same time, feminist and lesbian rights filmmakers--Michelle Citron, Maxi Cohen, Spiro, Friedrich, Vanalyne Green, Amalie Rothschild and Claudia Weill, to name a few--used diary and confessional films to express their conviction that the personal was political.[15] The subjective documentaries that have surfaced on screen, primarily on public television and through funding of organizations such as ITVS,[16] participate both in a socially critical documentary history and a particular history of social mobilizing. They accompanied and were sometimes direct expressions of social movements of inclusion, which organized around culture and lifestyle, and which often found political expressions in what came to be known as identity politics.

The highly personal work at the cutting edge of documentary also parallels other trends in the arts, which equally reflect the entangling of personal and social. For instance, in literature, personal narratives that cross genre lines, such as The Autobiography of Malcolm X, have changed the face of publishing. In journalism, the "New Journalism" has now become the old guard. In anthropology, subjective and selfreflexive ethnography has superseded the self-assured case study, while in literary studies deconstruction has destabilized the traditional role of the author.[17] In dance, the body has become social statement, as in the work of Bill T. Jones.

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The very subjectivity of these documentaries makes an implicit social comment on the erosion between public and private spheres in daily life and on the rise of identity formation as an active, self-directed process in contemporary daily life. The restructuring of the traditionally public realm is a uniting feature in current analyses of social crisis. Historians chart the rise of advertising as a virtual national language in tandem with the shifting boundaries between public and private.[18] Philosophers, among them Jurgen Habermas, describe the encroachment on the texture of community life by large bureaucracies and powerful corporations.[19] Anthropologists and other humanist scholars see the never-ending search for identity as a tool to navigate the various and global landscapes of culture and power that

people now inhabit simultaneously.[20]

In the broader social process, television has been--as Joshua Meyrowitz has argued so elegantly--an agent of the cultural destruction of older divisions between public and private life.[21] Television tears down the barriers of authority for the young, creates the illusion of intimacy and models conversations in public ("my divorce," "their parents' incompetence," "his impotence") that once were had only in private. It has inevitably changed what we expect to talk about and how we expect to talk about it. In particular, advertisers on commercial television have whispered consolingly and persuasively to, now, generations of viewers that they are misunderstood, neglected, put upon and not nearly nice enough to themselves.

The pervasiveness of this kind of message, for writer Charles Baxter, is evident in what he calls "dysfunctional narratives" in mass media. He argues that American storytelling--not just on television, but in literature and politics--over the last two decades has been marked by what he calls the "Romance of Victimization." This mapping of "the psychic landscape of trauma and paralysis," he writes, runs parallel to "a political culture of disavowals."[22] Confusion and powerlessness, all exacerbated by advertisers' unceasing exhortation to happiness, drive speakers to a frenzy of easy blame, confession and exculpation. A prime example for Baxter of fractured narrative is the tabloid talk show. It is easy to see this fractured narrative in media performances in which media figures, from rappers to Rush Limbaugh, declare themselves misunderstood, neglected victims.

This logic can also be extended to "reality" TV shows. On shows like Cops and Emergency 911, fiction and reporting are deliberately blurred in ways that play on the widely felt disjuncture between personal experience and public or official "truth,"[23] a game that reduces social significance to geewhiz amazement.[24] In this case, the spectator becomes one of the victims of narratives without heroes or resolution.

The process that started with Donahue in the 1970s, with manifest good intentions, by the 1990s had turned into the gleeful sleaze of RicE, Maury Povich and Jenny Jones. This was, of course, not simply a result of cultural trends. Deregulation beginning in the late 1970s fostered economic conditions that vastly increased programmers' appetite for cheap-to-produce shows; but among the most successful were those exploiting the theme of victimization and catering to aleatory cynicism. In them, television's virtual public space is made ironic, and intimate life made a passing spectacle.

SYMPTOM AND RESPONSE

In this light, subjective documentary comes to look like both a symptom of

breakdown in the boundary between private and public, and an opportunity to launch public discussion about the terms of social identity and public life. Certainly that is what producers see themselves trying to do, in different ways. Kinoy, coproducer of Teen Dreams, said he worked with a Harlem high school student, a Latino gang member in Philadelphia and teen runaways in Los Angeles because "the more authentic voice you can have in this electronic meeting place of the TV, the more you begin to break down the monopolization of presentation of life at the end of the 20th century." He argues, "I don't think discussion can be there if there isn't a way for all different segments of the population to have an open voice."[25] Ilan Ziv, who sees the subjective documentaries he has produced as one important element in a daily news diet, says, "The idea is to give the camera to people who are creating reality, and then to see how this reality takes shape through their eyes." That lived perspective, he argues, helps viewers "to connect and learn how to care."[26]

Some television programmers have seen subjective documentaries explicitly as opportunities to expand public life, by which they mean open presentation and exchange of perspectives. For them, personal documentaries in the proper context create what Alive TV's Nell Sieling calls "an alternative public space"[27] and what P.O.V. codirector Ellen Schneider calls a "public sphere."[28] The programmer's job is to shape the context so that the documentaries can be seen as more than idiosyncratic and selfindulgent expression. For instance, P.O.V. contacts organizations with an affinity to the issue before a program airs and coordinates activities, provides on-line forums following the airdate and encourages viewers in its "Talkback" segment to send in cassettes recording their own reaction and commentary (aired in a following episode).

The project of carving out social space, for representation or debate, is inevitably contentious. At a minimum, today's personal documentaries testify to a broadly felt, inchoately expressed quest for narratives that escape commercial formula. This is the flip side of widespread public cynicism about journalists, TV news and reality shows as biased, sensationalistic, or exploitative. Both reactions justifiably reflect a cruel divorce between viewers' lived experience and the structures of media power. Tentative though the expression of the social location of the hyper-individual may be in these works, it merits consideration precisely because the producers are struggling to find a public language for today's and tomorrow's virtual communities.

Such a public language would require democratic possibilities in the world that permit it to be more than rhetoric. Certainly, the road to hell is already

well-paved with good intentions, as Phil Donahue is here to testify. It is very easy to package pain, to make vulnerability into victimhood and to mock the hapless in the name of raising important social issues. It is easy in a different way to sneer at the sensationalists and the vendors of vulnerability and to blame the public for its disinterest in the world beyond its purchasing power. Meanwhile, the challenge of naming and discussing the terms of our ever-more-fluid culture is real. In sometimes clumsy, sometimes creative ways, camcorder storytellers address that challenge, as do journalists and programmers who see themselves as architects of virtual public spaces.[29]

NOTES

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11. Ralph Engelman, Public Radio and Television in America: a Political

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27. Nell Sieling, personal correspondence with author, February 14, 1995.

28. Ellen Schneider, personal correspondence with author, October 22, 1994.

29. The author thanks Barbara Abrash, Larry Daressa, Faye Ginsburg, Jay Rosen, Jay Ruby, Ellen Schneider, Steve Schwartzman, the staffs of Independent Television Service, California Newsreel, Women Make Movies and P.O.V. for comments, information and access to films and videos. This work was partly funded by a Guggenheim fellowship.

Resources

Independent Television Service until mid-July: 190 5th Street E., #200 St. Paul, MN 55101-1637 (612) 225-9035

as of August 4, 1997: 51 Federal St., #401 San Francisco, CA 94107 itvs@itvs.org

California Newsreel 149 9th St., #420 San Francisco, CA 94103 newsreel@ix.netcom.com

Women Make Movies 462 Broadway, #500E New York, NY 10013 (212)

925-0606

P.O.V. The American Documentary 220 W. 19th St., 11th fl. New York, NY 10011 (212) 989-8121 pov@pbs.org

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Still from Hide and Seek (1996) by Su Friedrich.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Still from A Healthy Baby Girl (1996) by Judith Helfand.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Still from When Billy Broke His Head...and Other Tales of Wonder (1995) by Billy Golfus and David Simpson.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Filmmaker Alan Berliner, director of Nobody's Business (1996), and his father Oscar.

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