Memory, Place and Autobiography

Memory, Place and Autobiography:

Experiments in Documentary Filmmaking

By

Jill Daniels

**Cambridge
Scholars**
Publishing

Memory, Place and Autobiography:
Experiments in Documentary Filmmaking

By Jill Daniels

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2019 by Jill Daniels

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-2135-4
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-2135-3

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations vii

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction 1

Part I: Becoming an Independent Filmmaker

Chapter One 16
Formative Years

Chapter Two 34
British Independent Filmmaking

Chapter Three 54
Becoming an Independent Filmmaker

Chapter Four 65
Mediating the "I"

Part II: Experiments in Place

Chapter Five 82
Place and the Familiar

Chapter Six 95
Place as Allegory and Metaphor

Chapter Seven 113
Sites of Contestation and the Iconography of Dislocation

Part III: Memory & Traumatic Memory: Representing the Unrepresentable

Chapter Eight 128
Mediating Memory in the Documentary Film

Chapter Nine 141
Absence and Silence: Remembering, Misremembering and Forgetting

Part IV: Blurred Boundaries: Hybrid Strategies and Techniques

Chapter Ten 154
Inside the Academy: Creativity, Intuition and the Bricoleuse

Chapter Eleven 163
Realism and the Imagined

Chapter Twelve 177
The Documentary "Interview": Realism and Performance

Chapter Thirteen 189
Excavations: Remediation of Found Footage

Chapter Fourteen 197
Screens: Beyond the Digital

Conclusion 203

Bibliography 207

Index 228

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Chapter One

Fig. 1-1 *My Parents*. circa 1955
Fig. 1-2 *R. and Me (on the right)*. 1965
Fig. 1-3 Still from *Description,* Jill Daniels, 1975
Fig. 1-4 Still from *Debacle,* Jill Daniels, 1977

Chapter Two

Fig. 2-1 *Independent Film-Makers Association Newsletter*, 1977

Chapter Three

Fig. 3-1 Still from *I'm In Heaven*, Jill Daniels, 1989
Fig. 3-2 Still from *I'm In Heaven,* Jill Daniels, 1989

Chapter Four

Fig. 4-1 *Girl on a Swing* in *My Private Life* & *My Private Life II,* Jill Daniels, 2014-15

Chapter Five

Fig. 5-1 *Belchite*, *Northern Spain,* Jill Daniels, 2009
Fig. 5-2 *Horses* in *Not Reconciled,* Jill Daniels, 2009

Chapter Six

Fig. 6-1 *A Fire near Belchite*, Lauren Daniels, 2009
Fig. 6-2 *Girl in a Red Dress* in *Not Reconciled,* Jill Daniels, 2009
Fig. 6-3 *Procession in Irun* in *The Border Crossing*, Jill Daniels, 2011
Fig. 6-4 *The Model House Completed* in *My Private Life,* Jill Daniels, 2013
Fig. 6-5 *A Border* in *The Border Crossing*, Jill Daniels, 2011
Fig. 6-6 *Sian at the Border* in *The Border Crossing,* Jill Daniels, 2011

Chapter Seven

Fig. 7-1*Wall in Belchite* in *Not Reconciled*, Jill Daniels, 2009
Fig. 7-2 *Old Men in a Cemetery* in *Not Reconciled*, Jill Daniels, 2009
Fig. 7-4 *Jill in the Tobacco Factory* in *The Border Crossing,* Jill Daniels, 2013

Fig. 7.5 *Interior of a Car at Night* in *The Border Crossing*, Jill Daniels, 2011
Fig. 7-6 *Girl in a Night-Club* in *The Border Crossing*, Jill Daniels, 2011

Chapter Eight

Fig. 8-1 *ETA* in *The Border Crossing*, Jill Daniels, 2011

Chapter Nine

Fig. 9-1 *Jill With Interviewees* for *Not Reconciled*, Lauren Daniels, 2009
Fig. 9-2 *Station* in *The Border Crossing,* Jill Daniels, 2011
Fig. 9-3 *Station II* in *The Border Crossing*, Jill Daniels, 2011
Fig. 9-4 *Station III* in *The Border Crossing*, Jill Daniels, 2011

Chapter Ten

Fig. 10-1 *A Corridor* in *The Border Crossing* Jill Daniels, 2011

Chapter Twelve

Fig. 12-1 *Aitziber* in *Not Reconciled,* Jill Daniels, 2009
Fig. 12-2 *Maria* in *Not Reconciled,* Jill Daniels, 2011

Chapter Thirteen

Fig. 13-1 *My Private Life*, *II* Jill Daniels 2015
Fig. 13-2 *My Private Life II*, Jill Daniels 2015
Fig. 13-3 *My Private Life II*, Jill Daniels 2015

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book began its life as a PhD research project at the University of East London. I extend a whole-hearted thanks to my former doctoral supervisors Susannah Radstone and Roshini Kempadoo for their support and patience. I am indebted to Cahal McLaughlin for his advice and support and Valentina Vitali for her encouragement. I also want to thank Paul Dave, David Chapman, Jill Nelmes, Catalin Brylla, Kate Hodgkin, Annette Kuhn and Lizzie Thynne who gave me great feedback along the way. I want to thank everyone–too numerous to name here–who appeared in my films and who helped to realize them. I also want to thank Brand Thumim for his belief in me as a filmmaker and David Glyn for motivating me to return to filmmaking. Thank you Lauren Daniels for kindly allowing me to use your photographs, helping me on filming trips and enduring zero star hotels. Finally, a huge thank you to Sandra Milner for your enthusiasm, wisdom and good humour.

INTRODUCTION

> *As writers, we articulate thoughts and experiences, but as photographers and filmmakers we articulate images of looking and being. What is thought is only implied, unless it is appended in writing or speech. Some would say that images, then, are not in any sense knowledge. They simply make knowledge possible, as data from observations. But in another sense they are what we know, or have known, prior to any comparison, judgment or explanation.*
>
> —David MacDougall.[1]

In writing this book I have several specific aims in mind. My primary aim is to explore the varied cinematic strategies and filmic techniques and tropes that are available to the documentary filmmaker in the mediation of memory, place and autobiography. In focusing on autobiographical films I propose that the filmmaker in her dual role as maker and subject of a documentary film may act as a cultural guide in an exploration of the social world.

I argue that in the mediation of memory, particularly in memories that are associated with traumatic events and experiences the mimetic approach of realism in the production of documentary films may not always be feasible in recalling the past; memory may instead be evoked through an elliptical approach that may include critical realism, enactment and the use of found footage.

I also explore the concept that place may be foregrounded in documentary films to interact with memory and subjects–not in order to provide an easy context for exploration or for aesthetic qualities but as a character. To this end, filmic tropes of metaphor and metonymy may be important tools in enriching the mediation of place, for example through the image of the house and the border, which play prominent roles in my films and those of others. I suggest that the notion of the border may be articulated both as a physical divide and a metaphor of contestation.

My films, and most of the films I discuss in this book are hybrid forms constructed through filmic tropes of realism and fictional enactment. I note there are distinctions between the notion of documentary realism, as the provision of evidential material, including observational filming and the participatory interview, and the imagined, through the creation of fictional characters and enactment. However, I suggest that experimental documentary films may be hybrid forms constructed through cinematic tropes of realism and fictional enactment and yet still remain documentary films. I analyse experimental documentary films–my own films, and films made by others–in order to explore the proposition that images themselves may have great value, not just as data for analysis but in conveying knowledge. I interrogate the idea that experimentation in documentary films may question the notion of evidence or authenticity and may avoid perceived constraints of certainty and reliability. I also address the way filmmakers and artists may turn to a remediation of their own past films and those of others as "found footage" in order to make new practice.

The book is also intended to provide insight into independent documentary filmmaking by charting the historical trajectory of the British independent filmmaking movement, with a specific focus on my own development as an independent experimental filmmaker. I argue that the organized independent filmmaking movement in the 1970s and 1980s achieved a great deal in assisting the development of experimental films. Finally, to bring the book back to the present I track the growth of new online distribution outlets and new media through digital technologies and social media available to documentary filmmakers today and explore how these differ from the experimentation carried out in the past.

Experimental documentary films

The films I made over a period of six years are conceived as experimental documentary films. I focus on experimental films because they may bypass the demands for certainty, evidence and veracity.[2] The demand for "evidence" is generally found in the conventions of mainstream documentary filmmaking whose aim is primarily to provide authentication of the mediation of historical events.[3] Experimental films, on the other hand, most often question the notion of evidence or authenticity, avoiding perceived constraints of certainty and reliability. The filmmaking strategies deployed in experimental documentary films are varied and this offers a flexibility that may open a window onto distinctive and original ways of mediating historical events. Experimental documentary films do not generally intend to provide the last word on a particular subject but make a contribution to its exploration. Experimental films are usually not immediately popular because they are often considered difficult to “read” in their use of unconventional strategies. Interestingly, their breakthroughs in terms of uniqueness of technique and form are often incorporated into the vocabulary of the mainstream film.[4]

Autobiography

Autobiography is at the heart of the majority of the films explored in this book. As an established independent filmmaker I am used to delving into my own experience of the world, drawing on memories and feelings as well as thoughts to inform my films. Annette Kuhn observes, that although experience is often played as a trump card of authenticity in order to forestall further analysis:

> …experience is undeniably a key category of everyday knowledge [and] part of me also ‘knows’ that my experience−my memories, my feelings−are important because these things make me what I am, make me different from everyone else.[5]

I do question what has led me to my current preoccupation with memory and autobiography. This is not an easy question to answer. My preoccupation may be due to my advancing age. Or it may be due to the fact that past events that had significant effects on my life are erupting into my present consciousness, demanding to be explored through a cinematic discourse for presentation to the wider world. It is also necessary to ask then, as I do in my films, what is it that is “going on” in the current climate of the world today−culturally, socially and politically−and what has been “going on”, (for we are all formed by history) to create the fertile ground for an exploration of the self.

In my filmmaking practice I may use archive material and still images of the past in order to provide evidence, but I also deploy a range of allegorical and metaphorical filmmaking techniques to engage with subjectivities, since the designation of these in audio-visual language is never entirely fixed or determined. They remain open to interpretation and offer a poetic evocation of the past and engagement with subjectivities that is useful in expanding the discourse of experimental documentary films. As Catherine Russell observes:

> Allegory is a means of reinscribing ‘distance’ as a discursive practice that enables the critic to use history as a critical tool […] the allegorical discourse […] apprehends otherness as fundamentally uncanny. It marks

> the point of a vanishing and transitory subjectivity that is at once similar and different, remembered and imagined."[6]

Delving into autobiography in order to mediate memory involves a process, an excavation, a digging deeper, which lends itself to experimentation, the poetic and the uncertain. It brings one a step closer to an acknowledgement that subjectivity and self-reflexivity may provide rich possibilities for the cultural exploration of the social world. Autobiographical filmmaking always carries with it a challenge to the notion of the possibility of a unified subject. Where the filmmaker is both the subject and the object of the gaze she is necessarily divided but it is that very division which makes it so compelling. As Alisa Lebow remarks, this creates "an awkward simultaneity–being *in* and *of* at the same time" but she suggest that it is this division "that makes first person filmmaking so complex, co-implicated and, indeed, so compelling."[7]

Over the last decade there has been a significant growth in autobiographical documentary filmmaking, but there is also a significant history of autobiography in feminist filmmaking, particularly during the 1970s. I discuss some of the reasons for this recent growth and briefly survey that history in order to draw comparisons and differences, culturally and politically, with current autobiographical film practice, including my own.

My films

All my films that I have chosen to discuss in depth in the book explore my preoccupation with filmic reflexivity, autobiography, narrative and cinematic forms, as well as an engagement with subjectivities, place and memory. I deploy the filmmaking strategies of a critical realist practice and fictional enactment. The films include filmed observation of daily lives and locations, witness "interviews" and "conversations" with subjects, archive material and in *My Private Life II* (2015), found footage. The films are *reflexive* in that attention is drawn to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking.[8]

The Border Crossing (2011), *My Private Life* (2013) and *My Private Life II*, are also *self-reflexive* in that they articulate a representation of my "self". The use of self-reflexivity enables me to analyze more deeply the complex relationship created between the filmmaker as subject and producer, and the spectator. *Not Reconciled* and *The Border Crossing* are located respectively in Spain and the Basque region (northwest Spain and southwest France), where small communities were disrupted by traumatic events as a result of war or other types of violence, and my parents' small north London flat. My motivation in making these films was my desire to explore communities–and in the case of the two films that form *My Private Life*, my own family–that have demonstrated a reluctance to acknowledge, remember, or discuss their experiences of traumatic events.

My impetus for making *Not Reconciled* (2009), set in the ruined town of Belchite in northern Spain, evolved from my interest in the history of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and my earlier observation of privations and extreme inequalities in Spain in the late 1960s. I have a particularly vivid memory of a train journey I took through Spain during that period. As the train neared Madrid, I saw a shanty-town of improvised open shelters and shabbily dressed inhabitants.[9] It was the first time that I had seen evidence of desperate poverty and so many people living outside "normal" society. I did not forget my sense of anger and distress.

At the start of the 21st century, I became aware through the British press, of the existence of unmarked mass graves in Spain. In recent excavations, bodies have been discovered of people who were murdered or executed during the Civil War and its violent aftermath. I had previously carried out research on the history of the Spanish Civil War and I was drawn to the idea of making a film about the mass graves. A Spanish friend told me about Belchite, a town in northern Spain that was destroyed during the Civil War and has lain in ruins for 70 years. In my imagination Belchite was full of ghosts of the dead and I thought there was a real possibility that there were mass graves in or near the town. I subsequently visited Belchite where a local inhabitant told me about the alleged existence of bodies under the town's ruined buildings. Jaime Cinca, a local historian, also showed me a mound of earth in close proximity to the ruined town that he claimed was a mass grave.[10] In wanting to make a film that would articulate the history of Belchite, I aimed to represent it as a site where the voices of characters–ordinary people who had died in the fighting–could be heard.

My intention in the filmmaking strategies deployed in the mediation of place and identity in *Not Reconciled* was partly to provide a voice for the outsider–"the marginalised, disenfranchised and disenchanted."[11] –and partly to comment on the period of Spanish history that was dominated by the dictator, General Franco, who ruled Spain from 1939 until his death in 1975. I made several research visits to Belchite where I met and talked with some of the local people about their memories of life there. I concluded that an effective methodology in making the film would be to conduct filmed conversations with former inhabitants of the ruined town and the neighbouring eponymous “new” village, and also to create fictional characters, ghosts evoked from the Civil War period. The fictionalized ghosts, Rosa and Carlos, are portrayed as killed in the civil war and buried in a common grave waiting to be discovered. Rosa and Carlos are not intended as symbols or mouthpieces for crude political propaganda; they are fictional ghosts with human frailties and needs. As they wait to be discovered, they bicker and flirt with each other, boast of their exploits and rage against their fate. Rosa’s voice-over tells us she is lurking in the shadows:

> *If you look out of the corner of your eye you might see me. I’m always here under the ground.*

Not Reconciled is constructed through scripted voice-overs, based partly on published texts of the history of the town and partly on diaries of the protagonists in the Civil War, left and right and include the 3-week conflict that took place there in August, 1937. It explores the imagined circumstances of the deaths of the Rosa and Carlos and their consignment to a mass grave. This method allowed me control over the narrative outlined in the ghosts’ dialogue and voiced descriptions. Rosa is portrayed as a heroine fighting for the liberation of women and for a socialist revolution. I chose the name Rosa after my heroine, Rosa Luxemburg, the Jewish Polish Marxist revolutionary who was assassinated in Berlin in January 1919, when she was 47 years of age. The notion of cowardice and bravery as contested and complex conditions in the face of imminent death is articulated in the film when Rosa describes her own murder:

> *I wanted to be brave, but who in the end can die bravely?*

Rosa is portrayed as conflicted and weak, yet strong in her acknowledgement of her own weakness. The notion that total bravery is an unattainable ideal is also articulated through filmed conversations with local inhabitants who are portrayed as evasive and forgetful in their discussion of the Civil War.

My next film, *The Border Crossing* (2011), was created from my desire to explore the period when the Franco dictatorship ruled the Basque region in Spain, and to engage with my experience of a sexual attack in that location many years ago. At the heart of *The Border Crossing* is the mediation of “unreliable” memories of traumatic experience. The strategy I chose was to express the experience through an *absence* of its representation. My memories of the events leading up to the sexual attack and its immediate aftermath consist of a series of vivid, disjointed fragments of images, sounds and sensations. There are substantial gaps in my memories and I am uncertain where they lie in the chronology of events. I have no expectations that more memories will now emerge.

I also experience feelings of great unease centred on particular memories, for example the inexplicable loss of a bracelet after I reached the Basque region in France. I chose to explore some of these "unreliable" memories in *The Border Crossing* in order to convey a sense of this unease and to evoke memories associated with events leading up to and after my traumatic experience. Certain locations I visited during the pre-production period felt intensely familiar to me. I had the strong sensation that I had been there before. However, they did not "fit" visually with my memories and I could not logically place myself there. The vivid sense of location and dislocation led me to the decision to foreground place in both films. The choice of locating *The Border Crossing* in Spain and the Basque region in Spain and France provided me with a useful continuity of place from *Not Reconciled.*

After I completed *The Border Crossing* I chose to continue my autobiographical exploration by making a film about the effects of secrets on my own family history. *My Private Life* is a 63-minute filmic exploration of subjectivities. My aim was to excavate a buried past to bring to the surface uncomfortable secrets around my father's unacknowledged sexuality. The film tells the story of my parents' early lives, their marriage and divorce, my mother's remarriage and violence at the hands of my stepfather and my parent's decision to live together again. In documenting and placing myself at the heart of the film through performed roles I created distinct selves that accord with my roles of filmmaker and interlocutor and subject.

In *My Private Life* I adopted an auto-ethnographic approach that Catherine Russell describes as, "a form of 'self fashioning' where the ethnographer comes to represent themselves within the film as a fiction, inscribing a doubleness within the ethnographic text."[12] I followed this film by making *My Private Life II*, a 25-minute, split-screen film, which I constructed through the re-editing and reformatting of footage from the longer single screen film, *My Private Life*. My aim in *My Private Life II* was to reflect on the different possibilities of format and editing choices; one that would expand the idea of uncertainty and lack of closure since the text may always continue in new forms. At the heart of this methodology is the use of repetition, of images, gesture and sound to allow a reconsideration of the film's discourse.

Analysis of experimental documentary films by other filmmakers

In addition to my own experimental documentary films, I analyze films made by others. They were selected because they resonate in various ways with the subject matter of my films and they engage with similar themes of memory, place, identity and autobiography. Some of them also deploy experimental filmmaking strategies in the mediation of place and memory that aim to provoke uncertainty about authenticity and the evidential sequencing of events.

They include Amos Gitai's *House* (1980), a film about the rebuilding of an Israeli-owned house in Jerusalem, that was formerly owned by Palestinians; Elizabeth Stopford's *We Need to Talk About Dad* (2011), which explores traumatic experiences through a direct representational enunciation of the historical world; Carol Morley's *The Alcohol Years* (2000), an autobiographical evaluation of her former life in Manchester; and her later film, *Dreams of a Life* (2011), a reconstruction of the life of Joyce, whose body was found in a London flat three years after she died; Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige,* (1991), an exploration of the filmmaker's Japanese American mother's internment in a camp during WWII; Sarah Turner's *Perestroika* (2009), an autobiographical film that focuses on place, memory and identity; and Carla Subirana's *Nadar* (2008), an autobiographical exploration of memory and identity through her grandfather's disappearance and execution in the Spanish Civil War and her grandmother and mother's memory loss from Alzheimer's disease.

Organization of the book

The book is organized into four distinct sections. Part I: "Becoming an Independent Filmmaker", is a contextual section, charting the development of my filmmaking practice, from my very early film experiments as a student, my early films after leaving film school, and my subsequent move into autobiographical filmmaking. My desire to explore the cinematic mediation of my identity evolved from my feelings of "difference", or the sensation of being an “outsider”, that began during my childhood. In my films I have dedicated myself to a process of questioning myself. A persistent sense of “difference” and the feeling of being “outside” the mainstream, occupies a significant part of this section of the book.

The development of my filmmaking practice is set within the historical trajectory of the British independent filmmaking movement and explores significant events in my personal and professional life. In my political activism during the 1970s and 1980s I deliberately positioned myself in opposition to mainstream society and filmmaking. Groups of independent filmmakers first emerged in Britain in the 1930s and grew in cultural and social influence to become an organized movement of independent film activists during the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1970s I joined this movement and still consider myself to be an independent filmmaker. Unfortunately, from the 1990s onwards the movement fell into decline and today no longer exists in the same form. Nevertheless, groupings of independent filmmakers do still exist and individual independent filmmakers continue to make films. I have continued this oppositional stance, placing myself more or less permanently at the borders of mainstream filmmaking.

In Part II: “Experiments in Place”, I give consideration to how the articulation of place may be deployed in films, not in order to provide an easy context for exploration or for aesthetic qualities, but to fully interact with memory and identity. I argue that where subjects live and where their identifies are formed are central to memory and experience. Place may be represented therefore, not as an adjunct to space, or solely as a support to subjectivities, but as a character that is foregrounded and interacts with memory and subjects. I analyze spectatorial engagement with place and discuss how allegory and filmic tropes of metaphor and metonymy are important tools in enriching cinematic language. I focus on how certain signifying objects−such as the image of the house−play prominent roles in films. I discuss the articulation of the notion of the “border” as both a physical divide and as a metaphor of contestation. I also discuss how one may articulate a fractured sense of identity in a location such as a war site.

In Part III: “Memory and Traumatic Memory: Representing the Unrepresentable”, I address the cinematic mediation of memory and particular memories that are associated with traumatic events and experiences. While my films are autobiographical I address the mediation of memory in order to explore how memory may interact with identity. As Tzvetan Toderov observes, a sense of our identity tells us who we are, allowing our existence to be recognized, that we are not nobody, that we are not in danger of being swallowed up by the void:

> So if we learn something about the past that forces us to reinterpret the image that we had of ourselves and of our own circle, we have to modify not just an isolated aspect of our selves, but our very identity. If you have seen an Alzheimer patient, then you've seen memory loss destroying identity.[13]

In my films and in my discussion I also explore how the mimetic approach in many conventional documentaries may not always be feasible in recalling the past, and memory may instead be expressed through varied filmmaking strategies. I discuss how classical linear narrative conventions may be insufficient as a mode to represent memory due to the difficulty of fixing memory to specific moments in time and I consider the alternative narrative conventions used in my own films and in films made by other filmmakers. I also devote a chapter to the exploration of my approach to memory through autobiography in *The Border Crossing*, *My Private Life* and *My Private Life II* and films made by others.

In Part IV: "Blurred Boundaries: Hybrid Strategies and Techniques", I evaluate my choices of filmmaking strategies and filmic techniques deployed in the films I analyze in depth. My films were produced from within the academy, but most of the films made by others were not. In making films from within the academy I am wary of falling into over-theorisation in the production of my practice. I suggest that making films to prove or test theory does not allow for mistakes or for failure, which can paradoxically enrich a work. Nevertheless, the academy provides a context where learning from mistakes and failure allows for development of ideas, and film practice may be regarded as provisional and experimental, not in order to "have the last word", but a process of trying and testing in the creation of knowledge. This opportunity is rarely obtained outside the academy. Since filmmaking communicates in a sensory mode that is quite separate from the rigour and precision of the written word, film outputs cannot be qualitatively measured with any degree of precision; nevertheless film is capable of its own rigour and precision. I contextualize my methodology through a discussion of notions of creativity and intuition. I posit the notion that the methodology in my film practice is akin to that of a *bricoleuse*, a "handywoman" who accumulates raw materials from whatever is at hand, and only when these are ordered in relation to other entities according to a system, does their significance become clear.

My ambition for the analysis in this book is to provide a synthesis of conceptual and perceptual exploration. I hope that the films I analyze are not seen as illustrative of the theory or vice versa, but that the films I discuss in depth and the writing merge as fully complementary to one another.[14] The Soviet filmmaker Lev Kuleshov valued film theory as essential to enable the filmmaker to raise their work above the narrow framework of craft. He observed that: "We must not build our work solely on individual experience and on 'artistic inspiration'. Tested methods, the experience of colleagues must be recognized and studied."[15]

Taking into account the argument posited by Kuleshov I developed and constructed my films by drawing upon film theory to inform the practice of the films' making; exploring ideas embodied in my previous films and those of others; and a reliance on intuition. This pragmatic approach has been invaluable both in my development as an experimental filmmaker and my evaluation of films. I hope my methodology and my conclusions may be useful for the general reader, the cinephile, and other experimental filmmakers and film theorists (who may of course be the same people).[16] I hope that the reader will appraise themselves of some of the films. To this purpose all my later films discussed in the book are open access and internet links are provided in the bibliography. (Some of my earlier films mentioned in the book were made on 16mm film and are not easily available on video. In these cases I have noted where they are archived or distributed).

Terms used in the book

In the book I refer to the traditional terms, "films" and "filmmaker" as generic expressions to describe my output and the works that I produced. These terms, through common usage cover analysis of filmmaking practice without resorting to a discussion of the specific technical means of their production.[17] I use the term mediation to focus on the general way in which place, memory and subjectivities are re-formed through a cinematic discourse to a spectator. I use the term representation when I am analyzing the mode by which stylistic signifiers of aspects of the historical world, such as objects, people, locations and events are deployed and received by spectators with differentially marked identities. I keep in mind that my choices of representation may never be culturally neutral.[18] I use the term "portrayal" with reference to the strategies used to depict people in films. In my analysis of place in films I note that many theorists that I draw on to support my discussion refer to place as landscape or cityscape.

I choose to use the term “place” since “place” may reference more than a rural landscape or a cityscape; for example, it may also refer to a small town, a village, a street, a border crossing or a house. In practical terms, I delineate my auto-ethnographic writing of memories of events from my past from the theory and analysis by placing it in italics and using the present tense.

Notes

---

[1] David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image,* 2006, page 5.

[2] Marcia Landy, *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media,* 2001, page 58.

[3] I am aware that in recent years this notion is not widely held by film theorists, artists and experimental filmmakers, in what is sometimes described as the “Documentary Turn”. This refers to the tendency among some artists and documentary filmmakers to make no claim for their work with regards to genre specification. This can be traced back to Hal Foster’s *Return of the Real*, 1996; Catherine Russell’s *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video,* 1999, and Documenta 11 in 2002. It builds upon the methods of ethnographic fieldwork and the desire to experiment. See also Mark Nash, ‘Experiments with Truth: The Documentary Turn’, *Anglistica* 11, no. 1/2, 2007, pages 33-40.

[4] Marcia Landy, *op. cit.,* page 59.

[5] Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory & Imagination,* 2002, page 33.

[6] Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Art in the Age of Video*, 1999, page 25.

[7] Alisa Lebow, *The Cinema of Me: the Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary,* 2012, page 5. See also, Carol Morley’s *The Alcohol Years,* 2000; Sarah Polley’s *The Stories We Tell*, 2012; Rea Tajiri’s *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige*, 1991.

[8] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2010, page 31.

[9] This may have been Cañada Real, a shanty town that still exists on the outskirts of Madrid. See Giles Tremlett: [Online] Available from: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/16/drug-clans-shanty-town-madrid [Accessed: 13 January 2014].

[10] Jaime Cinca’s documentary, *Spaces of War/Espacios de la Guerra* (2007), provided me with information for Rosa’s dialogue in *Not Reconciled*. A clip is available online at: http://www.documentalesetnograficos.es/documentales/historia/espacios_de_la_guerra__belchite.php [Accessed: 20 August 2012].

[11] Paul Gready, *Political Transition: Politics and Cultures*, 2003, page 2.

[12] Catherine Russell, op. cit., 1999, page 277.

[13] Tzvetan Todorov, *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century,* 2003, page 165.

---

[14] Where links to clips or the whole films are available to other filmmakers' work that I refer to in this book I have endeavored to include them. It was not always possible to supply film links due to copyright or distribution issues.

[15] Lev Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov*, 1974, page 42.

[16] For discussion of film practice as research see Desmond Bell. 'Creative film and media practice as research: In pursuit of that obscure object of knowledge', *Journal of Media Practice*, 2006, Vol. 7, No. 2, pages 85-100.

[17] See Estelle Barrett & Barbara Bolt (eds.), *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, 2009 [2007]. See also Ludivine Allegue et al (eds.), *Practice-as-Research in performance and screen*, 2009.

[18] See Stuart Hall, *Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 1997.

PART I:

BECOMING AN INDEPENDENT FILMMAKER

CHAPTER ONE

FORMATIVE YEARS

> *When the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration: indeed, when the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist.*
> —Judith Butler[1]

In tracing my development as an independent filmmaker I explore some of my significant life experiences in the recognition that, as Judith Butler argues, in seeking to give an account of myself I must also become a social theorist, since my personal history is one that is "implicated in larger social formations and historical processes."[2] My journey to become an independent filmmaker involves memories of my childhood and teenage years. They have been influential in forming an identity that I draw on for my filmmaking practice. Some of these memories have already been reworked as material for my films. As a child, in common with all children, I thought my family's circumstances were completely natural, but as I grew older I perceived that my family's situation was different to those of most of my peers. David Vincent perceptively observes that:

> When a child first becomes conscious of himself, the way of life of his parents and companions will appear both natural and inevitable, but as he grows older and gains some knowledge, however incomplete, of other forms of existence, so he will begin to comprehend the peculiarity of his situation.[3]

I did gradually comprehend my peculiar situation, but instead of being reconciled to its peculiarities, or proud of the differences, I found myself feeling increasingly uncomfortable. Through some unwritten law in my family, or perhaps by a form of osmosis, I was conscious that my parents' private life and considerable personal difficulties should not be made known to the wider world. It created the feeling–along with millions of others who undoubtedly feel the same–that I was living a double life; on the one hand a secret and hidden life and on the other, a public one. I was unable to reconcile the two halves of my life and this led to feelings of great discomfort and frustration.

My early years

I had an itinerant childhood, moving home and location on a regular basis. I was a secular Jewish middle-class child, with every material comfort (until I was fourteen when my father's businesses were put into liquidation), although I was often in trouble at school. From an early age I felt as though I was a member of the "wrong" family because my Jewish parents led a bohemian secular lifestyle in London, at a time–during the 1950s and early 1960s–when Jewish society and the conservative political ruling class frowned upon bohemian behaviour. My superstitious paternal Romanian grandmother made valiant efforts to impress upon me that being Jewish was "special" and anyone non-Jewish was not altogether human. Being "special" gave me a vague sense of my own importance, but I also felt keenly that the world around me did not regard me as special. My paternal grandmother was an imposing figure who intimidated my mother.

I vividly remember an incident that occurred when I was around nine years old. My grandmother, who lived in Southport in the north of England, arrived at our London flat unexpectedly and my mother, taken by surprise flung a large pack of bacon into the empty washing machine.[4] I watched in amazement and a sneaking sense of admiration as she greeted my grandmother warmly, as though nothing untoward had occurred. This incident remained a persistent memory and formed the basis for a scene in my short black comedy film script, *Flux*, (unproduced). I drew on my sense of contested Jewish identity for my early films and my first venture into an autobiographical film, *Skin Deep* (1996), is a documentary about my grandmother's life in Romania and Britain. (This film also refers to my father's sexuality, which is explored again in my later autobiographical documentary, *My Private Life* (2014)).

I gradually became aware that my mother liked to keep up certain appearances–to my father's religious family for example–and did not always say what she really thought. My parents had married young–my mother met my father when she was seventeen and he was twenty-one. Two years later they married and at first led a conventional suburban lifestyle in Manchester and later in Cheshire. But they became restless and bored with the constraints of Jewish suburban life. My mother opened the first coffee bar in Manchester around 1960 and a few months later my father sold his share of his father's raincoat manufacturing business to run it with her. But a year later, they left the restaurant in the hands of a manager, abandoned their provincial Jewish social circle and moved to London with my two bothers and me, where they led a "glamorous" bohemian lifestyle, mixing with the celebrities they had met in Manchester and London, including Alma Cogan, Lena Horne and Nat King Cole, famous singers of the day.

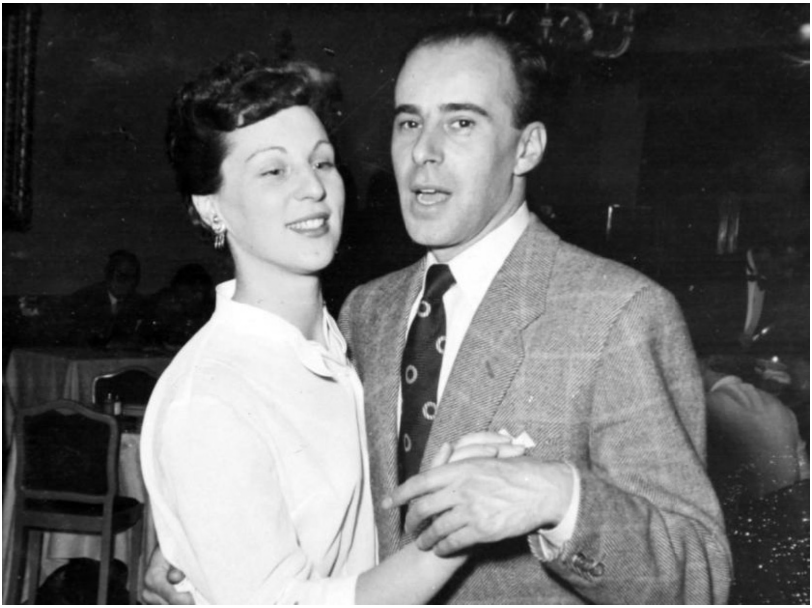

Fig. 1-1 *My Parents.* circa 1955

In London, wrenched away from my home, school, cousins and friends and everything familiar, I felt isolated. My father made elaborate plans that were intended to make our fortune but the majority of these plans came to nothing. Many of my parents' new friends were gay men who made no secret of their sexual orientation inside the walls of our flat. At that time I knew no one outside my parents' circle who openly admitted to being gay, and homophobic language was common currency. I did not discuss my family's lifestyle at school and did not invite my school friends to my house. As a middle class pupil at a working-class school and desperate to fit in, I “downgraded” my middle-class accent and attended School Assembly, which included singing Christian hymns. My attempts to fit in did not immediately succeed:

“I’m in Assembly when the head teacher suddenly appears. She marches me out of the hall and leads me into a small classroom. For the next four years I chant in Hebrew, “Blessed are you Lord”[5] *miming the rest of the prayer because I don’t know the words. I hate school”.*

Gradually I perceived there might be difficulties in my parents’ marriage. Since I never saw my parents argue I attempted to put these thoughts out of my mind. Nevertheless, it was becoming harder to avoid the fact that there were secrets in my family. All families have their secrets as Annette Kuhn observes:

> A family without secrets is rare indeed. People who live in families make every effort to keep certain things concealed from the world, and at times from each other as well. Things will be lied about, or simply never mentioned. Sometimes family secrets are so deeply buried that they elude the conscious awareness even of those most closely involved. From the involuntary amnesia of repression to the wilful forgetting of matters it might be less than convenient to recall, secrets inhabit the borderlands of memory.”[6]

I knew that, as Kuhn puts it: “something in the family was not right, conflicts were afoot: conflicts a little girl could not really understand, but at some level knew about and wanted to resolve.”[7] Since my parents were preoccupied with their lives and were rarely at home I was thrown onto my own resources and my strongest influence during adolescence was my school friend, R. (See Fig. 1–2).

R.’s parents were Holocaust survivors. Her father, a Czech refugee, was taciturn to the point of total silence and her mother, a gentle, sad German woman, also a refugee, did not speak much English. R. and I became experienced groupies, tramping up and down the Kings Road in London, gate-crashing parties. We truanted from school, stayed out late at night, stole money and took recreational drugs. The possibility that my father might be homosexual lurked insistently in the corner of my mind and I was fearful of the imagined parental wrath I would bring down on my head if I inadvertently talked about it to friends or mentioned it to my two brothers. As Carolyn Steedman observes: “All family secrets isolate those who share them.”[8] I did not know if my father’s homosexuality was a reality or if it was my fantasy; it became a secret that was always present. Since homophobic language was commonplace amongst my peers I was defensive of my father, but also felt guilt and shame, and tainted by the fact that my family "set-up" was not "normal".[9]

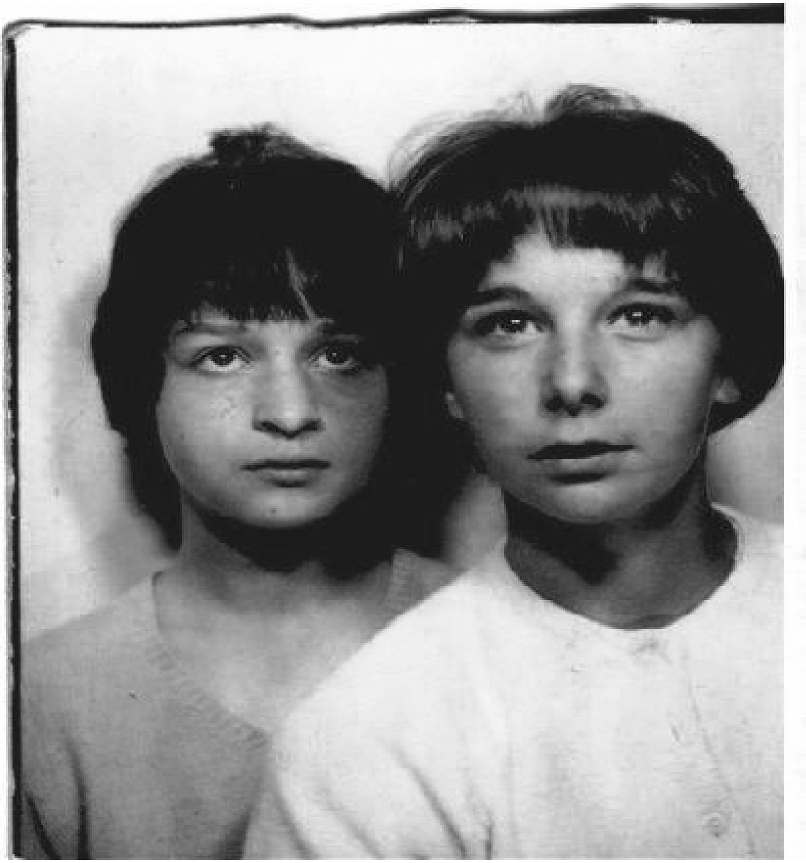

Fig. 1–2 *R. and Me (on the right)*. 1965

When I was fourteen or fifteen most of my father's restaurants were put into liquidation. My parents did a lot of crying and shouting. I retain a single vivid memory from that period:

"*I hear raised voices and enter the living room. My parents and grandmother stop talking. My mother is crying. I say hello but nobody*