

# THE CINEMA OF ME

The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary

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**WALLFLOWER PRESS**

LONDON & NEW YORK

# INTRODUCTION

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'The Cinema of Me' is something of a deceptive title for a collection of essays about first person documentary films. Deceptive in that it preys on the all-too-readily accepted impression of first person films as self-absorbed, myopic, ego-driven films that only a mother could love, despite the fact that the films discussed in this book, almost without exception, defy such expectations. The title does, however, point to the levity, humour and playfulness with which a filmmaker may approach her or his self-representation, further debunking the myth of the stultifying seriousness with which a filmmaker might choose to represent herself. And yet in this volume we take a serious look at the implications of this mode of representation, examining a broad range of first person filmmaking from around the world in order to both expand the ambit of what may constitute its practice(s), and to analyse the contribution such films make to the documentary form and to the very notion of self-representation.

First person films can be poetic, political, prophetic or absurd. They can be autobiographical in full, or only implicitly and in part. They may take the form of self-portrait, or indeed, a portrait of another. They are, very often, not a cinema of 'me', but about someone close, dear, beloved or intriguing, who nonetheless informs the filmmaker's sense of him or herself. They may not be about a person, self or other, at all, but about a neighborhood, a community, a phenomenon or event. The designation 'first person film' is foremost about a mode of address: these films 'speak' from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position. Whether this is done in the first person singular or in the first person plural, is in part, the concern of this book.

As anyone who has ever attempted to ascribe a grammar to film knows,

cinema is a somewhat recalcitrant object, refusing to cede to the rigid demands of the form: language has grammar; film – in its proliferating semiotics, its indeterminate syntax, its ultimate resistance to rules – does not. As James Monaco quipped many years ago, it's 'impossible to be ungrammatical in film' (1981: 119). However, I cling to the grammatical formulation for two reasons. Firstly, it allows me to identify a documentary mode or classification, under which can fall a broad range of related yet divergent practices: the self portrait film, the essay film, the video diary, as well as any other documentary form that endeavours to articulate rather than occlude or suppress the position of the filmmaker. In saying this, of course, I open a can of worms. Must the filmmaker's voice literally be heard? Is not their perspective always, implicitly at least, available to be read? In other words, is not this designation too broad to be useful? Would not all documentary, if not all filmic and indeed artistic practice fall under this classification then? My answer is yes, and no. We can, of course, if our tendency is toward the pedantic, argue that all film can ultimately be read as first person, in the same way we can admit, as Christian Metz once did, that every film is a fiction film (1982: 44); or conversely, as Bill Nichols later volleyed back, that every film is a documentary (2001: 1). All of these claims hold true simultaneously and yet do nothing to further a discerning enquiry into the subject at hand. It is far more useful, not to mention more intriguing, to limit the sphere of debate to a broad enough set of practices that admit for a diversity of aims and approaches, while not so broad as to obviate the relevance of the category entirely. Like all categories, it is imperfect. Yet I would argue that it is less imperfect as an umbrella term, than 'autobiographical' documentary, the term preferred by several authors writing on the topic until now (see Lane 2002; Renov 2004a; Gabara 2006). For it should soon become clear, as I have already intimated both here and elsewhere (see Lebow 2008), that first person film is not primarily, and certainly not always explicitly, autobiographical. Subjective as it may always be, the exploration of the filmmaker's own biography is a much less centrally important pursuit in these films than one might expect.

The second reason I cling to the grammatical designation 'first person', and just as pertinently for the study at hand, is for its own formal dualism. The first person grammatical structure can be either singular or plural. By not specifying which form is to be privileged, we allow the resonances to reverberate between the I and the we — to imagine indeed, that the one doesn't speak without the other, that in fact, the 'I' inheres in the 'we', if not vice versa. I find myself increasingly persuaded by Jean Luc Nancy's (2000) formulation of the singular plural, wherein the individual 'I' does not exist alone, but always 'with' another, which is to say being one is never singular but always implies and

indeed embodies another. That means the 'I' is always social, always already in relation, and when it speaks, as these filmmakers do, in the first person, it may appear to be in the first person singular 'I' but ontologically speaking, it is always in effect, the first person plural 'we'. The grammatical reference reminds us that language itself, though spoken by an individual, is never entirely our own invention, nor anyone else's. 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. This is as true about the expression of individuality and subjectivity in first person films as it is in language itself. And that is precisely what I find most arresting and fascinating about first person films. They are quite the opposite, in most cases, of the singular 'I', and can even be understood to be a 'cinema of we', rather than a 'cinema of me'. Had that not presented itself as such a ghastly clunker of a title, in fact, it would likely have supplanted the current title of this book, which takes as its premise that the speaking, and in this case filming, subject is neither solipsistic nor monologic, but is always already in dialogue or as Nancy might have it, always already 'speaking with'.

The very act of communicating, whether writing or filming, implies an other, at the very least an interlocutor or audience. Indeed, many times we find that first person filmmaking goes further, well beyond the self, focusing its sights on another as the 'protagonist', the main attraction, and 'subject' of the film, be it a lover, icon, nemesis, relative, friend or some larger collectivity (affective, proximate, imagined community, clan, group, and so on) or phenomenon. This necessarily implies a dialogue between subjects, rather than insisting on the subject/object relations of the traditional documentary. And of course, beyond any notion of traditional dialogue, it also entails the dialogic splitting of subjectivity, as suggested earlier.

Thus, articulating an address in the first person emphatically does not imply an autonomous and autogenous 'speaking self' as if the Cartesian subject had never undergone review. Although it is true that some filmmakers may share an enlightenment conception of the 'rational' and knowable unitary self, it is less true to say that self-representation in film (or otherwise) is ever such a straightforward and singular pursuit. Not only is the constitution of subjectivity a much more complicated endeavour than such a model would imply, its representation further co-implicates others in the process of mediation.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, we should remember, that there is no such thing as a universally apprehended or accepted model of subjectivity. In fact, one of the justifications for promoting a version of subjectivity that belies the individuality so touted in Western conceptualisations of the self is to create a context in which other modes and models of subjectivity may be explored. That said, my own

dependence on mostly Western contemporary philosophical thought reveals the limits of my intellectual training that I nonetheless hope for this volume to begin to redress, if only preliminarily. Ideally it can spark further enquiries. Thus one of the aims in surveying cultural paradigms is to excavate different conceptions of the self, to imagine multiple and even competing models of subjectivity itself.

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, and it is here that we should be reminded of the second term in the subtitle of this volume: subjectivity.

When a filmmaker makes a film with herself as a subject, she is already divided as both the subject matter of the film and the subject making the film. The two senses of the word are immediately in play – the matter and the making – thus the two ways of being subjectified as, if you will, both subject and object. Let us briefly note that in the Middle Ages, the Oxford English Dictionary indicates, the meanings of these two words were the reverse of what we now know them to be, but only ‘subject’ still retains both possible significations. There is the important philosophical notion of subjection put into play here, where one only becomes a subject (in the sense of an individual with rights, needs and desires) through the process of subjection to an order, social, political and, of course, symbolic. One becomes oneself as a subject, subject to laws and powers beyond oneself, which are nonetheless constitutive of that self. Inherent in this formulation is the somewhat troubling idea that before we can imagine ourselves at all, before we can think of ourselves as independent or autonomous, we are already subject to another’s will, to other powers and forces not of our own making, and indeed, subject to another’s gaze as well. Linking notions of subjecthood and subjectivisation, then, inextricably ties the concept of the individual to entire systems of relation, interdependency and power. If we then link the process of subjective representation to self-representation as the title implies, it quickly becomes clear that it entails a process of becoming both subject and object of the gaze, a somewhat antinomial position that is nonetheless constitutive of being able to reflect upon and represent the self. There is no simple subjectivity, and even deceptively simple representations

of the self nonetheless imply an impossibly multiple positionality of subject/object. Thus the project of first person filmmaking (or rather, mediamaking) always carries with it a challenge to the notion of the unified subject.

This doubled position is implied in Michael Renov's cleverly titled book, *The Subject of Documentary* (2004a). Renov teasingly concludes his introduction by observing 'that the subject in documentary has, to a surprising degree, become the subject *of* documentary' (2004a: xxiv). That it should be a surprise has more to do with documentary's own repressions, but indeed it is not a transition, a move from one modality (subject *in*) to the next (subject *of*), as implied in this formulation. Rather, it is an awkward simultaneity – being the subject *in* and *of* at the same time – that makes first person filmmaking so complex, co-implicated and, indeed, so compelling.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to consider the challenge that first person filmmaking poses within the documentary field. Subjectivity is by no means a new documentary modality, yet the traditional posture of the theatrical and television documentary around the world has been historically that of objectivity. The personal point of view of the filmmaker was typically elided, left to languish on the cutting-room floor, while more positivist assertions have always taken preference. Prior to the 1980s, with a few notable exceptions, the first person address remained mostly within the purview of avant-garde filmmakers.<sup>3</sup> The artist's vision could be foregrounded at a time when the documentarian's had to be suppressed. The emergence of the subjective voice in documentary had long been hampered by the burden of disinterested objectivity, an impossible ideal that required innumerable evasions and repressions to effect.<sup>4</sup> However, for the past quarter of a century, especially but not exclusively in the West, incursions into the first person mode of address have become increasingly common, with the field of first person filmmaking gaining steady momentum. 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.<sup>5</sup> In truth, first person film goes beyond simply debunking documentary's claim to objectivity. In the very awkward simultaneity of being subject *in* and subject *of*, it actually unsettles the dualism of the objective/subjective divide, rendering it inoperative.

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Several years have passed since a US film distributor friend of mine warned me that European festivals had tired of what they perceived to be an American epidemic of first person films. It was the first time it had dawned on me that first person filmmaking might be perceived as peculiarly American and it was at

that point that I began to enquire of friends and colleagues around the world, filmmakers and film scholars alike, if first person filmmaking was emerging out of their own cultural contexts or if it constituted yet another American imperialist invasion. The likes of Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock might incline us to the latter view (albeit of the friendlier face of cultural imperialism, if such a thing can be imagined), but without investigating further it was impossible to know. Not surprisingly, I quickly learned that first person films, though perhaps most elaborated in the context of North American filmmaking at least in the 1990s, was indeed making its presence felt in geographical regions as diverse as India, Brazil, Australia, China and Guinea. While this emergence has not been uniform in all places, nor does it necessarily imply an autonomous cultural context, free from the influence of North American media and education, it did intrigue me enough to pursue the idea that subjectivity in documentary cinema might indeed find varied expression, not only due to individual filmmaker's idiosyncrasies, but also due to differing cultural conceptions and configurations of the self. After all, the proscription against it, in the form of this anonymous distributor's informal warning, had come before anyone had properly considered the phenomenon with any serious attention.

In the past decade, first person film has arrived on the scholarly scene, with several monographs dedicated to its various permutations. As indicated earlier, some authors take autobiography as their starting point (Lane 2002; Renov 2004a; Gabara 2006), some take the question of subjectivity in documentary as an organising principle (MacDougall 1998; Renov 2004a), still others analyse individual modes of address, such as the 'essay film' (Rascaroli 2009), vernacular video (Dovey 2000) or the home movie (Moran 2002; Ishizuka and Zimmerman 2007). Other designations abound: domestic- or auto-ethnography (Russell 1999; Renov 2004a); performativity (Bruzzi 2000; Nichols 2001); and prior to these the preferred designation was reflexivity or self-reflexive film (Ruby 1988; Nichols 1991; MacDougall 1998). I believe the term 'first person' is uniquely able to include and incorporate the range of these related yet at times distinct practices all of which in one way or another find their way into the pages of this book.

The majority of the studies into various aspects of first person filmmaking focus on films from North America and/or Europe. This collection distinguishes itself in several ways. It is the first edited collection to approach the question of international first person filmmaking. Rather than focusing on one filmmaker, mode or region, it instead attempts to take a rough survey of the field internationally. It asks, in implicit and sometimes explicit ways, what are the conditions for the emergence of the first person mode of address in various parts of the world and what are its consequences? With essays written about first person

practices in India, Brazil, Argentina, the Caribbean, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Italy, Spain, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, this volume takes a broad look at a phenomenon that, though articulated differently in every instance, has become truly global. There is also the consideration of the emergence of first person practices on the internet, a digital medium that defies geographical borders and further complicates the already problematised notion of an integrated, embodied subjectivity. The breadth of the volume's purview does not compromise its depth, however, as each essay examines its subject in a theoretically challenging and innovative manner. With essays by practitioners, theorists and practitioner-theorists, the style and approach to the work is also varied and operates in productive dialogue, as the assertions of a talented filmmaker such as Andrés Di Tella, suggesting that his essayistic film form is a matter of trial and error<sup>6</sup> rubs up against the certainties proposed by the eloquent theorist of the essay form, Laura Rascaroli, as she identifies the masterful strategies of Antonioni's complex final identifications. The volume as a whole explores a range of first person iterations emerging at this moment in history, examining the role of geopolitical contexts as well as ethnicity, cultural identity and personal history in the construction of subjectivity in contemporary first person documentary.

This book asks, what is the nature of the interplay between the individual and culture and how is this tension played out in representational terms? How, or in what ways, can culture and ethnicity and even geopolitics be said to 'construct' the first person character on screen? In what contexts and for what reasons do we find first person filmmaking flourishing, and where is it still an unknown or unwelcome practice? We might even begin to ask why it emerges in certain contexts and not others.

The volume is divided into four sections: first person singular; first person plural; diasporic subjectivity; virtual subjectivity.

**First person singular** explores first person films that, in the main, directly attempt to represent an individual filmmaker's own subjectivity in relation to his or her larger collectivities, including several reflexive essays where the authors discuss their own first person films. This volume welcomes the critical reflections of makers' own first person filmic (and other media) articulations – in this section and elsewhere in the book. UK filmmaker and scholar Michael Chanan's essay begins the section by situating his own first person film in relation to some of the better known first person filmmaking practices in the field. Argentinian filmmaker Andrés Di Tella also tells of his own process of self-narration, identifying ways in which the endeavour is implicitly public and political, a social rather than a selfish act. Both Chanan and Di Tella would find their stories impossible to tell without engaging a range of historical and

political phenomena. In Kamal Aljafari's films, as explored by Peter Limbrick, his family stands in for the thousands of Palestinian families who stayed behind as Palestine was forcibly transformed into the Jewish State of Israel, while also retaining the particularities of their circumstances as formative of the filmmaker's own memory and identity. Limbrick engages the interventions posed by queer theory to read Jafari's radically displaced and non-normative first person film *The Roof*. This section includes discussions of films where the filmmaker's presence is apparent and his or her identifications are made manifest.

**First person plural** enters somewhat more fraught territory, wherein the films engage in a more circuitous route to self-representation, and the films under discussion here take many avenues to the self. Angelica Fenner details the myriad positionalities of the self that US filmmaker Jennifer Fox engages in her six-hour documentary project *Flying*. While Fox herself may have an uncritical approach to her own subjectivity, Fenner ably deconstructs the layers of identification in the work and the uneven distribution of authorial power. Sabeena Gadihoke's essay examines three Indian first person films in the context of a documentary film tradition that, prior to this century, appeared to have little place for overt subjectivity. In one of the films discussed, Shohini Ghosh's *Tales of the Night Fairies*, we see a different approach to the question of surrogacy of the self, that is also at issue in Fenner's essay. Ghosh's film involves a first person dissembling of sorts, as the filmmaker attempts to position the subjects of her film as a series of surrogate selves, identifying with their sexual rebelliousness and outcast status, while deftly avoiding her own embodiment of such a socially reprobate position.

The final essay in this section focuses on Israeli first person representation in relation to the Palestinian *Nakba*. Linda Dittmar weaves her own first person narrative into her investigation of a range of challenging films that detail aspects of the decades-old occupation that have indeed become a profound preoccupation for the filmmakers in question. It may be worth noting that Israel has a preponderance of first person filmmakers, something not nearly as common for filmmakers in the rest of the region. Not surprisingly, and perhaps not unrelatedly, we do find a higher degree of first person filmmaking also in Palestine and Lebanon, suggesting that the drive toward subjective filmmaking in the region is, directly or indirectly, tied to the political. Within documentary practices of the Middle East, those most inclined to take up first person filmmaking are precisely those who have experienced both an excess of mediation (predominantly via the news media), and in direct proportion, an excess of violent conflict. That is to say, in our contemporary world, war-zones beget not only mass mediation, but more recently a rash of self-mediation. However, the forms of first person address may be said to differ considerably and deserve

further comparative attention.

**Diasporic subjectivity** takes diasporic identities as its organising principle, with all of the complexities and permutations that may entail. Whether considering the multiple fictions of the diasporic home movies of a Trinidadian/Scottish family in filmmaker/theorist Elspeth Kydd's self-reflexive essay, or the multiple levels of cultural denials unpacked by Sophie Mayer with regard to Michelle Citron's CD-ROM project, *Mixed Greens*, this section examines the complex sets of identifications and dis-identifications inherent in diasporic self-representation. It also looks, via my own contribution, at the uncanny role of the filmic apparatus itself in some recent diasporic first person films, playing as it does an active role in the accelerated displacements of contemporary global migration.

**Virtual subjectivity**, the final section of this volume, looks at the emergence of virtual identities and the implications they have on contemporary self-representation. Here the disembodiment of traditional cinema and video is further enacted, making questions of 'autobiography' and first person all the more abstract and defamiliarised. Both contributors to this section, Peter Hughes and Alex Juhasz examine the virtual imaginings of politics and communities of YouTubers, yet they do so using very different stylistic and theoretical paradigms. Hughes' rather more sober sociological analysis contrasts nicely with Juhasz's decidedly experimental, yet certainly no less theoretically rigorous and challenging, style. There is the sense in these final essays that the self may have fully come undone, even as its representations proliferate seemingly infinitely into cyberspace.

## Notes

- 1 For a much more elaborated discussion of dialogic notions of subjectivity see Nancy (2000); see also Levinas (1998) and Butler (2005).
- 2 This play on words between complication and co-implication is developed further in Renov (2004b).
- 3 One of the first articles ever written on autobiographical non-fiction film focused on avant-garde films; see Sitney (1978). Two notable, but by no means the only exceptions to which I allude, include Joyce Chopra's *Joyce at 34* (1972, US) and Kazuo Hara's *Extreme Private Eros: Love Song* (1974, Japan). Surely one of the most important prototypes of the first person film is Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronique d'un Été* (1960), which articulates its address from the start in the grammar of the first person plural 'we'. Some of Agnès Varda's early documentaries, such as her *Uncle Yanco* (1967) and *Daggueréotypes* (1976) also foregrounded the filmmaker's subjective gaze, or as Varda would likely put it, her auteurist vision. There are other early feminist first person films of note, such as Amalie Rothschild's *Nana, Mom and Me* (1974) and Michele Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1978).
- 4 Renov makes reference to documentary's 'repression of subjectivity' in the introduction to *The Subject of Documentary* (2004a: xviii).

- 5 Renov makes this argument in his cogent essay on first person films (2008), as do I in the introduction to my book *First Person Jewish* of the same year.
- 6 The term *ensayo* in Spanish means 'essay' but as in French, it is also the word used for 'trial' as in the phrase 'trial and error', allowing a play on words in Spanish that requires this clumsy explanation in English.

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