

*Introduction:*  
*Reading First Person Documentary*

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*I am the other of me.*  
:: Edmond Jabès

First person documentary entails a range of practices, techniques, and temporalities: it can document a moment or event in the filmmaker's life; it can be a diary of thoughts and feelings; it can be a memorial for a relative, friend, or lover; it can be a testimony or a poem, an essay or a diatribe; it can be a rant, a romp, or a drone; it can be framed in the present, past, future, or even subjunctive tense. Some first person documentaries fit the more common autobiographical mold by giving a chronological account of the narrator's history. Others fulfill Walter Benjamin's ideal of fruitless searching and nonnarrative fragments that "yield only to the most meticulous examination."<sup>1</sup> Many make little or no effort to explore the past at all, entering a story *in medias res*, giving the impression of events unfolding before the camera, perhaps even for the camera's sake.

Despite this range and diversity, there are two distinguishing features of the first person documentary: subjectivity and relationality. All such documentaries, with their first person address, signal a subjectivity that was once, not very long ago, actively suppressed in documentary films. And, with the arguable exception of some video diary work, these first person works also share an aspect of relationality, involving many others in the project of constructing the self on screen. Filmmaking, autobiographical or otherwise, is not generally a solitary pursuit. With the exception of some video diaries, the films of this study are not made by a single individual sitting alone in a room as does the writer pensively penning her/his autobiography. Not only do films require crews (however skeletal), they also generally require subjects, someone to put in front of the lens. The first person filmmaker may well put herself before the

camera, but this then requires someone to operate it from behind. More commonly, autobiographical filmmakers frame their familiar or familial others in the participatory project that is filmic self-representation. It is the very personal relationship between filmmaker and subject that subtends the gaze and indeed defines the work. As autobiography scholar Susanna Egan has noted, “film may enable autobiographers to define and represent subjectivity not as singular or solipsistic but as multiple and as revealed in relationship.”<sup>2</sup>

If there can be said to be a grammar of the filmic autobiography, that grammar is surely film in the first person but it is not the first person singular. Autobiographical film implicates others in its quest to represent a self, implicitly constructing a subject always already in-relation—that is, in the first person plural. As psychoanalysis teaches, and as others such as Emanuel Levinas and Judith Butler have argued, the self is always a relational matter, never conceivable in isolation.<sup>3</sup> First person film merely literalizes and makes apparent the fact that self-narration—not to mention autobiography—is never the sole property of the speaking self. It properly belongs to larger collectivities without which the maker would be unrecognizable to herself, and effectively would have no story to tell. This study further emphasizes the relationality of the autobiographical subject by recognizing its cultural imbrications. The first person in the title and in the films in question is modified by a very particular plurality, Jewishness.

Avant-garde filmmakers discovered the first person well before documentarists.<sup>4</sup> The artist’s vision could be foregrounded, when the documentarians had to be suppressed. The emergence of the subject in documentary has long been hampered by the burden of disinterested objectivity, an impossible ideal that required innumerable evasions and repressions to effect.<sup>5</sup> A genealogical study of that which has been repressed in documentary’s drive toward maintaining the illusion of objectivity would reveal whole storehouses of subjective interventions lying on the proverbial cutting room floor, omissions required to sustain the impression of an unmediated flow straight from “reality” to the viewer. No such unmediated (automatic) stream carries 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. These films, which have proliferated for the last quarter of a century, expose the inherent instability of the documentary as well as the autobiography, and pose a challenge to the conceptual framework of the documentary field.<sup>6</sup> Michael Renov credits “the new autobiography” with the “construction of subjectivity as a site of instability—flux, drift, perpetual revision—rather than coherence,” and claims that filmic autobiography’s

transgressive status can be found partly in that it “posits a subject never exclusive of its other-in-history. In so doing, it challenges certain of our staunchest aesthetic and epistemological preconceptions.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, ironically, the rise of the author in first person films (something not conceived of as a particularly radical proposition in its literary counterpart) has been a most effective tool in derailing the ill-fated quest for objectivity, so long the Quixotic dream of documentary.

There were sprinklings of first person films in the 1970s, an increase in their production in the 1980s, and a virtual explosion in the 1990s, showing no sign of abatement today.<sup>8</sup> As documentary has found its way onto the big screen and into the public imaginary, with unprecedented commercial success in the beginning of this century, one cannot help but notice that many documentaries speak in the first person. Michael Moore, of course, led the way, with his inimitable obstreperous style, but many more have followed suit. Of the early twenty-first century “blockbuster docs” (as they have come to be known), several were first person films, and a disproportionate number were made by Jewish filmmakers: *Supersize Me* (Morgan Spurlock 2003), *My Architect* (Nathaniel Kahn 2003), *Tarnation* (Jonathan Caouette 2004), to name but three of the biggest. Although I will not be analyzing all three in depth, the very fact of their popularity spurs me on, considering that when I began my inquiry into Jewish first person films several years ago, few people had any idea what I might be going on about. I can now point to any one of these examples with some assurance that people may have at least heard of it. My hope is that, by the end of this book, the reader will be familiar with quite a few more and will also have an animated sense of what is most compelling about them and of the ways they enliven debates about the representation of (specifically Jewish) subjectivity in documentary film.

The films I choose to focus on in this study are not blockbusters, nor are they “popular” (or even widely seen). Quite the opposite, in fact, since one of my objectives as a film scholar is to write about lesser-known works that I believe deserve critical attention not only for their artistic merit and sensibility but for their near-seismographic sensitivity to cultural shifts and tremors. As Renov claims and as I intend to demonstrate, “it is in this domain of artistic practice—at the margins and interstices—that one can begin to take the measure of a culture, to discover its latencies and phobias as well as dismantle its preconceptions.”<sup>9</sup> The films that permit me to take that measure, and which comprise the core of this study, are: *D’Est* (1993) by Chantal Akerman; *Everything’s for You* (1989) by Abraham Ravett; *Thank You and Goodnight* (1991) by Jan Oxenberg; *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993) by Gregg Bordowitz; *Rootless*

*Cosmopolitans* (1990) and *Cheap Philosophy* (1993) by Ruth Novaczek; *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* (1994) by Deborah Hoffmann; *Nobody's Business* (1997) by Alan Berliner; *Daughter Rite* (1979) by Michelle Citron; *Tarnation* (2004) by Jonathan Caouette; *Phantom Limb* (2005) by Jay Rosenblatt; *In Her Own Time* (1985) by Barbara Myerhoff and Lynne Littman; and my own film *Treyf* (1998), made in collaboration with Cynthia Madansky.<sup>10</sup>

I make no claim, nor have I any intention, to conduct a comprehensive survey of all first person films made by Jewish filmmakers, in part because I do not have much faith in studies that pretend to be exhaustive, and in part because I lack the requisite archivist's compulsion. Instead, this study is a selective sampling of Jewish first person films that treat the question of subjectivity in particularly challenging and innovative ways, and which raise interesting questions about Jewish identity and cultural production. That is to say, it is an idiosyncratic look at complex strategies of self-representation in contemporary Jewish first person documentaries.

Many of these independently produced films construct a second or a fictionalized "self" that severs the autoenunciative lead character from the author of the text. Others detour through family or geography in their representation of self. Still others feature multiple authors. These films invent alter egos, present prior work as synecdoche for self, substitute other's memories as the filmmaker's own, and swap identities between characters. In this process of self-fictionalization, they wittingly or unwittingly contribute to the historicization of a postmodern Jewish subject.

Rather than constituting a separate genre, the use of experimental and fictional techniques in recent Jewish first person films is in line with larger, synchronous developments cross-culturally in contemporary autobiographical documentaries, also known as the "New Autobiography."<sup>11</sup> The forces of identity politics and related academic fields (queer studies, ethnic studies, etc.) have played a significant role in the increased production of Jewish first person films (along with that of much other ethnic and identity-based first person filmmaking) and also in the critics', curators', and scholars' interest in such filmmaking.<sup>12</sup> An emphasis on cultural specificity and the politics of location—the place from which one speaks—has demanded that filmmakers (and artists more generally) attempt to evaluate their own situatedness and consider ways in which that positionality impacts one's work, worldview, and relations with others.

I have found that many of the Jewish first person films in this study fall well in line with contemporary theoretical concerns, including those of documentary studies itself. The films deploy the so-called new, post-modern documentary strategies to ultimately reenact and update a number

of the struggles, conflicts, and concerns of earlier Jewish intellectual and cultural work. The modernist concerns of Ashkenazi diasporic culture that perturbed the early twentieth century's newly emancipated Jew—anti-Semitism, assimilationism, secularism vs. traditionalism, Marxism vs. Zionism, Hebrew vs. Yiddish—have found their way, in somewhat altered but still recognizable forms, into the creative lexicon of contemporary Jewish self-imagining.<sup>13</sup>

These films are examples of the autoethnographic impulse, wherein cultural concerns are explored or displayed through the representation of the self. The term *autoethnography* was coined in opposition to the colonialist ethnography, signaling the subaltern's appropriation and arrogation of the colonizer's gaze.<sup>14</sup> As such, it has constituted a critical intervention in the history of anthropology, representing a radical break with that discipline's checkered colonialist past. It has also, ingeniously (and indispensably for my purposes), been applied to autobiographical work that can best be analyzed in and through the paradigm of culture. Catherine Russell asserts that “[a]utobiography becomes auto-ethnography at the point where the film- or videomaker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes.”<sup>15</sup> I would modify this claim, shifting the emphasis onto the act of reception rather than the intentionality of the filmmaker. Thus, for me, autobiography becomes autoethnography at the point where the critic or viewer understands the film to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes—which is to say, any autobiographical or, indeed, first person film can be productively read as an autoethnography. And this, in brief, is my preferred reading strategy.

The subject has been subjected to severe scrutiny in the last half century and what we have been left with is a famously fragmented, divided, multiple, refracting, incoherent muddle. Along with the dismantling of the subject comes the dismantling of reading subjectivity exclusively as the expression of an autonomous, isolated individual. Not only is every utterance social in the Bakhtinian sense, but every autobiography engages the embodied knowledge, memory, history, and identity of much larger entities than the self. One encounters a lively, interactive communicative process with history in these films. To paraphrase Bakhtin: “each [autobiographical utterance] tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions.”<sup>16</sup> It is these intentions, traces, and resonances (which are not always intentional on the part of the filmmaker) that I will tease out through an exploration of contemporary Jewish self-representation in film. First person film is a fluctuating and variable, yet infinitely generative, indicator

of cultural horizons well beyond the narcissistic concerns of the individual subject and, as such, is an apposite if anomalous site for the study of cultural production. Thus we begin our journey of a collectivity spoken in the first person and the first person spoken in and through a collectivity (or several collectivities). The individual subject is neither subsumed nor wholly separate, but rather is as much a part of the process of collectivization as she or he is its product. To paraphrase a worthy locution, the subject in autobiography “must always belong—at some level—to a body politic.”<sup>17</sup>

The process of producing a self on screen engages typologies and tropes drawn from distinct, though multiple, cultural histories, and in turn contributes to the iconic representations of those histories. For all of the ontological difficulties that the terms *culture* and *history* present, this emphasis on cultural and historical context can, I believe, alter the expectations placed on autobiography that ordinarily (and problematically) assume a unified self within a singular, linear narrative—instead positing a constructed, culturally inscribed, fragmentary, and incomplete narrative that is neither the sole invention of an ideologically autonomous author, nor the collectively overdetermined product of a monolithic *culture*,<sup>18</sup> but rather is some admixture of these two impossible positions, made even more impossible (or exciting) by the fact that the cultural context is highly heterogeneous and always at some measure of remove.<sup>19</sup> In negotiating a similarly paradoxical set of relations, Chon Noriega proposed a third position for, in his case, Chicano testimonio videos, a position that he calls, following Doris Sommer, a “plural self,” wherein the individual is not only multiple in and of herself/himself but is always understood as a set of relations to a larger collectivity. This *plural self* is my analytical reference point for the Jewish first person films of this study.<sup>20</sup>

As will become apparent, this book identifies a distinct tendency in Jewish autobiographical documentary film: the use of self-fictionalization strategies to define a multifaceted, nonessentialist, contemporary “Jewishness” while dialogically engaging tropes of Jewish cultural identity originating in the pre- and post-Enlightenment eras. Questions of Jewish identity and cultural production suddenly fit quite strikingly with larger multicultural concerns, serving as a theoretical magnet where the politics of race, sexuality, gender, cultural and ethnic difference, political polarization, assimilation, tradition, and a host of other cultural determinants are all drawn together in one very dense, historically loaded, cultural location: *Jewishness*.<sup>21</sup> Jewishness is, of course, itself a manifold and polysemous cultural site. Better known for its unsituatedness or disaggregatedness (otherwise known as the Diaspora), Jewishness provides

dynamic and variegated vantage points from which to explore the range of concerns related to contemporary autobiographical film.

I want to say a word about my cultural object choice. It is not enough to simply claim uncritical affiliation as the motivation behind the choice to write specifically about Jewish work. I am conscious of the fact that Jews and Jewishness stand at the citational center of twentieth century trauma studies, as the paradigmatic modernist metaphor for suffering and victimhood, and, for that matter, as a potent contemporary political symbol of the return of the repressed. I do not wish to contribute further to an already overstated sense of exceptionalism. “The Jew” and “the Jews” have been allegorized, hyperbolized, metaphorized, and abstracted to such an extent that we could easily forget that we are not the model for all studies of identity, power, victimhood, witnessing, survival, diaspora, and of course trauma and memory.<sup>22</sup> Certainly the Holocaust has been cast by countless theorists and artists alike as the singular event that predicated the crisis of Western modernity, revealing the murderous underbelly of Enlightenment rationalism. By this, I do not mean in any way to refute the profound and horrific facts or effects of the Holocaust or to minimize its relevance. Surely it ranks as one of the most gruesome, nefarious, and premeditated genocidal catastrophes in history, and its tortuous ramifications will continue to play themselves out for some time to come. However, it is also true that scholars and artists in the West have a tendency to privilege that cataclysmic event to the near eclipse of all other massacres, genocides, wars, coups, revolutions, epidemics, or other man-made or natural disasters. Books, films, and museums about the Shoah are so numerous there are claims that they constitute an industry unto themselves. Jewish historians, sociologists, psychologists, and others are busy compiling stacks of video testimonies from survivors of the Shoah that would take the average human being multiple lifetimes to view. There is a protuberance to this archive that is somehow disquieting. It places Jews, and their peripatetic histories, at the eye of a cultural vortex in ways that would seem to need no further elaboration from the likes of me; if anything, a sense of scale might be in order. Yet it is precisely the force of these overarching narratives—and their concomitant metaphors and tropes—that make the films of this study so engaging. Indeed, this very lack of proportion may go some way to explain the proliferation of Jewish first person films in the last quarter of a century, giving me an uncommonly rich and varied object of study. That said, I do not intend to claim a special place for Jews in history, or even in the history of first person filmmaking. Importantly, I view the Jewish “I” in this book as an opportunity, not an exception; Jews are not the Chosen People here, they are simply a chosen focus for

a case study of an ethnically charged subjectivity as it has been elaborated and articulated in an ever growing and diverse body of films. In addition, there is some value in pursuing a study on the representation of subjectivity from one's own situated subjectivity. In this study, I start from my own first person perspective as a Jewish filmmaker who has made a first person Jewish film, and as a film scholar advocating for a culturally and historically situated study of first person films.

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### **Old Tropes, New (Con)texts: Auto-Jewish Reappropriations**

In the process of self-representation, the autobiographer inevitably encounters a profusion of cultural tropes that must be negotiated. It has been suggested that this is all the more true for film, considering its tendency to “typify” characters.<sup>23</sup> Autobiography, then, has the unenviable task of confronting, confounding, and even confirming the assumptions, impressions, and (mis)conceptions about the author's or filmmaker's identificatory positionings. We might even say, following Foucault and Butler, that it is in the process of negotiating and articulating these perceptions that the autobiography generates the self, which may then be (mis)apprehended as having existed prior to these mediations. In other words, it is only through this process of naming and imag(in)ing that the subject is constituted, and this naming always emerges out of a history of names that have been called. This name-calling is of course the process through which knowledge is attained and power is gained and claimed. Naming may not always necessarily be pejorative but it certainly can and has been a zone of danger, as in the case of the mentally ill, the queer, the nonwhite, and the Jew, among others. Names are not neutral, and the histories they carry take on a life of their own. As Judith Butler has argued in relation to queer identification, terms may be “redeployed, twisted, queered from prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” but they are “never fully owned” or controlled by the enunciator.

Names—and, I want to add, stereotypes and tropes—have a history that cannot be contained in the reappropriative gesture, no matter how important and strategic the intervention might be. It is also crucial to appreciate the power and relevance of reappropriation, even if it is never conceived of as the final answer, the last word on the names we've been called. Reappropriation is a risky game that can easily backfire, but it also has the potential to disrupt earlier meanings that may never regain their former implications and influence, due specifically to the syntagmatic shift that has occurred. The reappropriative maneuver involves precisely

the unauthorized arrogation of “properly” held power (the power to name or to subjugate), a typically destabilizing tactic. The question of whether a stereotype can ultimately be effectively reappropriated, reinterpreted, resituated, or repudiated is not easily resolved. History may persist in the trope, above and beyond the author’s intentions, but that does not mean that these sometimes tortured twistings of type cannot also be themselves torqued, altering both their form and their impact.

The expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the name itself: by the history of the usages that one never controlled, but that constrain the very usage that now emblemizes autonomy; by the future efforts to deploy the term against the grain of the current ones, and that will exceed the control of those who seek to set the course of the terms in the present.<sup>24</sup>

Butler remains unconvinced of the radical resignifiability of names, although she recognizes the provisional value of the strategy.

In the process of discussing several of the works in this study, I will consider the ways in which these contemporary filmmakers attempt to remold inherited stereotypes and their various (and varied) successes in reshaping the representation of their “selves” as Jews, among other identifications, through a manipulation of the terms of the stereotypes themselves.<sup>25</sup> The types of characters that fill the screens and who stand in for the autobiographical subject in many of these films include several by now well-worn Jewish cultural stereotypes: the chameleon, the charlatan, the rootless cosmopolitan, the pathological or sickly Jew, the wandering Jew. The slippery, contradictory, image of the Jew formerly found in the lexicon of the anti-Semite has come to yield a new meaning in the context of postmodern identity, basking in the cultural approbation of a currently sanctioned discourse. In this redemptive, culturally affirming shift, traditional Jewish stereotypes drawn from a vast antipathetic cultural cache have been transformed into a positive conception: the self as open-ended figure.

Let me briefly recount but a few of the recycled tropes that appear in the films of this study. The very title of Ruth Novaczek’s *Rootless Cosmopolitans* refers to a derogatory image of the Jew as a suspicious, shifty-eyed, urban byproduct. Novaczek also delights in parading loud, pushy, neurotic, typically Semitic-looking women across her screen. In *Cheap Philosophy*, her multiple characters and costume changes harken back to the image of the Jewish chameleon. Chantal Akerman fairly epitomizes the wandering Jew in *D’Est* and several of her other films. In Gregg Bordowitz’s *Fast Trip Long Drop* we see a reemergence of the

stereotype of the sickly, neurotic, and pathological Jew. In each of these films the stereotypes are transformed by their new context. The opposite also occurs in some films—the absence of Jewish markers (including stereotypes) in some leads us to question our own normative typecasting assumptions, such as happens when the white lower middle-class Texan family of Jonathan Caouette’s *Tarnation* leaves critics such as Stuart Klawans scratching their heads and proclaiming the film a “demolisher of stereotypes.”<sup>26</sup>

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### Unruly Corpus

Given my skepticism as to the inherent usefulness of overarching categories, and a distinct indisposition toward defining limits and borders of categories, it is not surprising that the films I have selected for this study prove relatively difficult to characterize, let alone categorize. I do not intend to create an airtight category of Jewish first person films that resists all conceptual leakage. The films of this study are exemplary of the crisis of definition and categorization that plagues documentary, autobiography and identity, in that they call attention to the necessary impurities of genres and categories to which they are nonetheless ascribed.

Nevertheless, it is possible to delineate five key criteria used in selecting these films. They are:

1. Independent films. As noted earlier, I am particularly interested in looking at noncommercial films, where a certain degree of autonomy can be assumed, and where it is virtually ensured that the films have not been considered in as much critical depth as they deserve.

2. Documentaries. Not unrelatedly, I focus on documentary and experimental films rather than fiction films. I might well have chosen to include autobiographical feature films, such as many of Woody Allen’s or Barry Levinson’s films, but I have decided to limit my discussion to those films, including the experimental variety, whose truth claims overlap in more directly troubling ways with documentary. In other words, the majority of films in this book partake of fictional and/or experimental strategies calling attention to the limits of documentary while still operating within identifiable documentary conventions. These “hybrid-docs” are more *about* flouting conventions and categorizations than properly constituting a coherent category in and of themselves.

3. Autobiographical. Even though I use an expanded definition of autobiography that includes many possible detours to the self, the films have nonetheless to be made by the person who was also in some sense

the central figure in the text. That is to say, the film had to be about some aspect of the filmmaker's own life.

4. Made by diasporic Jewish filmmakers. The films have to be made by diasporic Jewish filmmakers. Although there are many "new" autobiographical documentaries made by Israeli Jews, most notably and interestingly by maverick mockumentarist Avi Mograbi, I have chosen not to include a discussion of them here since I believe the conditions that have produced Israeli Jewish identities are too radically distinct from those forming their diasporic counterparts to be collapsed into one study. It was difficult enough to negotiate the *Jewish* criterion, which required that the filmmakers could somehow be identified or identify themselves as Jewish, though not necessarily in their films. Of course, this is a highly problematic criterion, not least because of the essentialist assumptions that subtend it (what makes a Jew—descent, ascent, or both? who gets to self-identify as a Jew? if one isn't self-identified as Jewish, but is born Jewish, can one still be identified by others as Jewish?). One quickly finds oneself in deterministic quicksand, with the ominous overtones of the Nuremburg laws lurking a bit too close for comfort. Would I have excluded, for instance, an autobiographical film made by a non-Jew who finds out belatedly that her paternal grandmother was Jewish, making her Jewish enough to be sent to the gas chambers but not Jewish according to rabbinical law? Of course I would include it, due precisely to the troubling issues it raises about identity and identification in relation to Jewishness.<sup>27</sup> However, any move on my part to finally determine Jewishness as a fixed criterion is doomed to repeat an unreflective essentialism that leads to myriad pitfalls, none of which would augment the value or the rigor of this study.

5. Aesthetically innovative. Crucially, any film that I have chosen to discuss in any depth has had to approach the autobiographical subject in innovative and multifaceted ways. This means that I have not included discussions in any detail of the most common Jewish autobiographical documentary: the artless, sincere, direct-address video that makes no attempt to deconstruct the subject or allow the subjectivity of the film its full range of complexity. These films do have their merit and their audiences, and much can be said about them, but inventiveness and creativity is not their strong point. The films in this study generally attend to the aesthetic dimensions of filmmaking in ways that make them particularly intriguing and rewarding from both a thematic and a formal point of view. This last criteria also seems to have had a determinative effect on the content of the films, especially with regard to the issue of traditional Judaism. It is not a coincidence, I believe, that films that defy or expand traditional documentary aesthetics and pose challenges to any simple or

unified conception of the self, such as those discussed in this book, tend to refrain from negotiating the question of religious tradition head on. They are by definition rebellious texts.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond these five general criteria, other factors emerged, quite apart from my own determination. For instance, all but one of the filmmakers (Barbara Myerhoff) were born after World War II. In addition, and to my dismay, there are no films here by Sephardic or Mizrahi Jews—that is, Jews of non-European origins—with the exception of Alan Berliner’s work. Berliner is half-Sephardic; however, the film I focus on here, *Nobody’s Business*, is mainly preoccupied with his Ashkenazi father and his father’s side of the family.<sup>29</sup> I hesitate to speculate as to why so few first person films have been made by Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the Diaspora, but I am gratified to know that more are in the process of being made.<sup>30</sup> In all other ways, the attributes of the filmmakers are surprisingly diverse; the films are made by men and women, straight and gay, American and European, of differing ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, formal and aesthetic inclinations, trainings, and points of view.

To return for a moment to the problem of the Jewish criterion, permit me to pose a few further questions. Is it enough to insist that the filmmaker is Jewish? Without explicit Jewish thematics, how can I justify including a film depending merely on highly suspect and unreliable essentialist categories? To insist that a film is Jewish because its filmmaker *may be* is to position myself as a gatekeeper of dubious authority. This book is meant to be a protracted consideration of a set of films that speak to contemporary cultural issues of Jewishness as elaborated through sites of subjectivity. And although by default I do stick fairly close to a notion of Jewish descent, almost exclusively including films made by people born into Jewish families, this is not a meaningful criterion in and of itself. Nor is a filmmaker’s own exploration or explanation of his or her Jewishness. Many films in this study do not engage Jewishness directly or forthrightly as might be expected. There is even a tendency toward crypto-Jewish expression in some of these films, as with Deborah Hoffmann’s understated, nearly undetectable, Jewish references in *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, the perfect American family stock footage in *Phantom Limb*, or the Converso confusion when Jonathan Caouette’s mother sings a gospel song in the opening of *Tarnation*. Still, these light imprints and even erasures are important Jewish representational strategies in and of themselves, difficult as they may be to discern, and having sometimes to be read against the grain.

Regardless of how the filmmaker wants to position a given film in relation to Jewish identity, I discuss each film with regard to a set of reading practices. In practical terms, this means that the Jewishness of the film may

inhere more in my reading of it than in the film's or filmmaker's own insistence. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has ingeniously claimed that "Jewish film is what happens when it encounters an audience."<sup>31</sup> This makes Jewishness in film an event—a happening that occurs in the encounter, not necessarily in the encoding. Intentionality of the filmmaker is secondary at best, and it is for this reason, in line with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's insight, that I eschew any extended consideration of intentionality (with the admitted exception of the discussion of my own film) and rather emphasize modes of reception—listening, observing, perceiving, filtering—that can be conceived of as "watching Jewishly." This reception can entail seeking out or being attuned to (or even distracted by) the "Jewish moments" in a film, to use Jon Stratton's term,<sup>32</sup> or it can mean analyzing the film precisely for the ways it effaces the trace of its own Jewishness. There is no one way to watch Jewishly, and in the course of this book I hope to propose several alternative approaches to the encounter.



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### Precursors and Prototypes

It is important to situate Jewish first person films within a history of first person documentary and experimental filmmaking generally. The personal documentary has developed as a form only in the last thirty years. Its insistent subjectivity flies in the face of documentary's unspoken dual dicta of objectivity and mastery. It does away with third person omniscient narration, and pirates documentary's legendary authority for personal use. As soon as a filmmaker declares "I think" or "I feel" in a film, the illusion of documentary disinterestedness disintegrates. First person film poses a challenge to the journalistic approach as well as to empiricist (scientific) and imperialist (ethnographic) models of filmmaking. The move toward first person filmmaking can be seen in part as a combining of the artisanal filmmaking techniques made popular by the lightweight sync-sound equipment developed in the late 1950s, and the rejection of the tenets of observational cinema that had become the documentary norm, especially in anglophone countries (notably the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada), by the end of the 1960s. American avant-garde filmmakers Kenneth Anger, Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, and others made early use of the first person in film, though we do see evidence of it much earlier, for instance in the very personal and intimate *Rain* by Joris Iven (1929) or Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Although Vertov is nowhere pictured in the film frame, he posits his family (his brother Mikhail and his wife Elizaveta Svilova) as his surrogate filmmaking selves.<sup>33</sup>

Self-reflexivity combined with a sense of personal stake was a strategy pursued by both Jean Rouch and Chris Marker in the 1960s and increasingly by the more critical ethnographic filmmakers beginning in the 1970s, who experimented with revealing the investments and positionalities of the filmmaker as she or he pursued the ethnographic object of study.

An early rebellion against the hegemony of observational cinema in the United States is the film *David Holzman's Diary* (1967), by Jim McBride. I mention this film because it signaled a break from the increasingly dominant direct cinema movement that touted fly-on-the-wall filming techniques—revealing the voyeuristic invasiveness of those very techniques while introducing the then unwelcome specter of the filmmaker's point of view. I mention this film also because it somehow seemed logical to McBride and his audience to make the protagonist—a self-absorbed, camera-wielding, Columbia University student obsessed with documenting every moment of his life—Jewish. His Jewishness goes completely un(re)marked in the film except for the obvious clue of his name. Why is the protagonist Jewish? What makes sense—in an unarticulated, self-evident way—about this choice?

I would argue that beyond the by now obvious tropes of the self-involved hyper-intellectual, Upper West Side Jew (not yet made internationally famous by Woody Allen at the time of *David Holzman's* release, but nonetheless a stock New York character) is the tacit recognition of a cultural proclivity, relative to its WASP counterpart, to break down barriers between personal and social, formal and informal, that subtend the distance required to maintain the illusion of objectivity in observational film.<sup>34</sup> Jewish culture has a deeply hermeneutical tradition, one where interpretation and argumentation are privileged over dispassionate engagement. The quip “two Jews, three opinions” playfully encapsulates the value of the situated relation to issues of the world that is characteristic of Ashkenazi Jewish culture. Personal opinion, in a word, matters. And it is this value, among others, that lends itself to the personal, subjective approach.

Again, in the United States, feminist filmmaking of the early 1970s was the first identifiable movement that hailed the personal film as an important medium through which to explore cultural and political issues; think only of the famous incantation “the personal is political” and you can imagine why this would be. One of the very first autobiographical films from that movement was a film called *Joyce at 34* (1972), by Joyce Chopra in collaboration with Claudia Weill, two Jewish women who went on to direct feature films. Chopra was originally known for her film collaboration with one of the founders of the Direct Cinema move-

ment, Richard Leacock.<sup>35</sup> *Joyce at 34* has become a classic feminist film and has come to represent (for better or worse) the white, middle-class, professional agenda associated with that movement. Chopra's Jewishness is effaced in all commentary on the film (despite the Passover seder that signifies "extended family" within the film), and instead it is her class and race (and, of course, her gender) that have been foregrounded.

Six years after Joyce Chopra's groundbreaking autobiographical film came out, Michelle Citron made one of the early feminist theory films,<sup>36</sup> *Daughter Rite* (1978). Citron's film received very similar critical acclaim, reception, and even derision as *Joyce at 34*, again without any mention of the filmmaker's Jewishness. *Daughter Rite* is a fake documentary that combines optically step-printed home movies and first person voice-over with a verité style narrative of two adult sisters who visit the house they grew up in while their mother lies ill in the hospital. Both narratives—the diaristic home movie footage narrated by a flat-toned disembodied female voice, and the fictional one of two sisters in their childhood home—represent what I took to be the lives, thoughts, emotions, and attitudes of non-Jewish, working-class, Midwestern women in their twenties. That the film was made by a working-class woman in her twenties, who may or may not have been the voice we heard in the voice-over sound track, seemed plausible. What was not at all apparent (at least to me) in the text, metatext, or even subtext, until Citron's autobiographical book came out in 1999, was that the film was made by, and to some extent about, a working-class Jewish lesbian from Boston.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of motivation or circumstances of production, the Jewish (and lesbian) content of Citron's own biography was suppressed in her semiautobiographical film, which has since become a classic of feminist film history.<sup>38</sup>



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### Why Now?

There has been a striking increase in Jewish autobiographical films in the last two decades, accelerating in quantity, and also transforming conceptually and aesthetically in the last ten years. This rise is directly in line with the increase of autobiographical film production generally, not exceptional to it, but the proportion of Jewish autobiographical films in relation to the proportion of Jews is quite high. It is worth considering why Jews in particular have gravitated toward the autobiographical film at this juncture in history. As I have already suggested, the extensive focus on Jewish history and experience does create an encouraging environment for such explorations, but this does not guarantee its emergence. On the practical

level, one might be tempted to surmise that the advent of affordable, accessible video equipment has enabled this work, as it has for so many other communities, yet only two of the dozen or so films treated here were actually shot on video, and both of these (*Fast Trip*, *Long Drop* and *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*) were blown up to film at considerable expense. What seems like a plausible explanation, one that indeed may go a long way to explain, for instance, the popularity of the video diary, turns out to be inadequate to describe this wave of films.

One may wonder what would make someone turn to such an unwieldy and expensive medium as film to create their autobiographical work, especially at a juncture when funding is by no means assured—as it was not, for most of the films considered here. Most films in this study were, in fact, made before there was any single funding source that specialized in or prioritized Jewish documentary. The funding sources vary from film to film, and, at least in the United States, funding for independent documentary became much scarcer by the mid-1990s than before, so there is little basis to deduce that the material conditions were ripe for this efflorescence of Jewish autobiographical filmmaking. The resources were by no means secure or steady and, at the time, there was no foundation or funder spurring the work on.<sup>39</sup> In terms of exhibition, though, there has been, beginning in 1981, a lively Jewish film festival circuit in the United States and Canada, and to a lesser extent in Europe and elsewhere, virtually ensuring that films with even the vaguest Jewish content have an outlet to reach (mostly) Jewish audiences. Speaking as one of the Jewish autobiographical filmmakers in this study, one of my primary motivations for making *Treyf* was precisely this opportunity to engage in direct dialogue with Jewish audiences internationally, specifically on questions of Jewish identity and politics, which I, along with codirector Cynthia Madansky, felt was in considerable need of new perspectives and alternative political/ideological paradigms.

There are also historical reasons for this outpouring of Jewish autobiographical films. In addition to the pervasive sense that Western culture is increasingly “characterized by surface homogenization, by the erosion of public enactments of tradition, by the loss of ritual and historical rootedness,” as anthropologist Michael M. J. Fischer has persuasively argued, there are more particular contemporary Jewish cultural anxieties.<sup>40</sup> As the experiences of migration and genocide recede from the province of personal memory, filmmakers have begun to construct images to depict that which remains or can be reclaimed in the formulation of contemporary Jewish identity.

I want to suggest that this moment in history marks a key transition

for Jews. As the immigrant and the survivor generations pass on, younger Jews, born after World War II, have been searching for ways to articulate Jewishness in their own terms while at times clinging to, or at least drawing from, representations of Jewishness from the past. As in a palimpsest, layers of histories resonate in the imagery, iconography, and thematics of these films. They are far more than accounts of individual histories. The films can be seen as examples of the Benjaminian flashes and bursts of history that erupt at a moment of danger and that reflect the “constellation which [their] own era has formed with a definite earlier one.”<sup>41</sup> What that moment of danger is may differ in each case, though some distinct themes do emerge. Half a century after the Holocaust, the most fearsome danger point of reference for any contemporary Ashkenazi Jew, the generations of Jews who personally experienced prewar Jewish life (either in Europe or elsewhere), or who survived/lived during the war, are aging if not already gone. The connection to an already fragile and endangered history is receding, and several of the autobiographies of this study have seized the moment to render the constellation visible between this present, post-Holocaust era and that definitive earlier one.

Those of us coming of age in the latter quarter of the twentieth century bear the burden of inventing Jewish identity anew, albeit with flashes of the past shocking us at moments. For the secular Jewish filmmakers of this study, there comes, along with a generational remove from what we might call “embodied Judaism” or *yidishkayt*, a lack of clarity and assurance as to the precise elements constituting a contemporary, secular, Jewish identity. Yet the films enact the very Jewishness that eludes their filmmakers; in this sense, the quest is the reward. Writing about Jewish ethnographic film in a way that also pertains to Jewish autobiographical film, Faye Ginsburg quite accurately asserts that these films play an important role in the figuration of Jewish identity and in the revitalization of Jewish life in new contexts. They are “part of, [and] even create, the phenomenon they document.” As such, she suggests, they would be “better understood . . . as part of ‘participatory’ or indigenous media, an emerging practice in which the subjects of the film are engaged as both makers and audience, so that the works are simultaneously about and part of the culture they depict.” She continues, “they are not simply filmic texts, but are *mediating* documents, part of the process of the re-invention(s) of contemporary Jewish identity.”<sup>42</sup> Borrowing Ginsburg’s insights, Jewish autobiographical film allows for identity construction and transmission in ways that engage emotional and sensory as much as intellectual perception. As Ginsburg aptly suggests, “these filmmakers forge meaning and definition from fragments of past and current Jewish experience, creating works

that both mark and are part of the process of cultural transformation that challenges and inspires the present generation.”<sup>43</sup>



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### Moving from Singular to Plural

This book is organized into two broad sections, each section comprising two chapters. The first chapter in a section entails an in-depth analysis of an individual film; the second analyzes multiple films that can be said to share the section’s common theme.

The first section thematizes first person films generated through some aspect of familial association and identification. If this sounds like a circumspect way to describe what could easily be called “family autobiography,” there is a reason for my awkward phrasing. Although it is true that the family figures in many if not most autobiographical films, Jewish or otherwise, it often does so in unexpectedly complex and indirect ways, as seen especially in my analysis of Chantal Akerman’s film *D’Est* in chapter 1. These first two chapters consider the multiple ways the family inspires, conspires, or indeed desires, in a range of first person Jewish films.

The second section focuses on a set of queer Jewish first person films, and the myriad issues raised in this dynamic conjuncture between two not entirely harmonious identity configurations.

Chapter 1 explores the relationship between history, memory, nostalgia and loss in the very dense and elliptical Jewish autobiographical film *D’Est*. This chapter explores Akerman’s indirect autobiographical style, where the countless anonymous faces she encounters on her journey to Eastern Europe serve as surrogates for her own. Akerman returns to the terrain of her family’s evacuation during World War II, reversing the east–west path of forced Jewish migration while enacting a very personal displacement of her own—that of the self. Akerman’s oblique autobiographical style not only transposes others’ faces for her own, but, equally uncannily, substitutes other’s memories, particularly her mother’s, for her own. Akerman imagines a past she never experienced, a past of exile and evacuation, her mother’s memory transmogrifying into her own in a poignant rendition of what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory.”

This form of indirect, displaced autobiography searches for traces of the past in the landscape of the present, where they erupt and disappear mysteriously. Walter Benjamin shadows Akerman in my analysis, echoing and prefiguring her movement eastward in his *Moscow Diaries*. I examine the two texts and indeed the two assimilated Jewish thinkers’ work

in relation to their treatment of the “East,” their shared corporeal representation of it and their refusal to make a political judgment or determination about it. Benjamin’s own era becomes one important flashpoint of Akerman’s vision as she searches faces for resemblances to, and hints of, a Jewish presence that has all but been effaced. A telescopic sense of time and a compulsion to remember mark this film as a Jewish text. In traditional Jewish culture, memory is an obligation and history contracts in an impossible millennial collapse where the catastrophes of each epoch come to exist palimpsestically in every present moment. *D’Est* exemplifies this Jewish form of remembering and constructs a Jewish self, that of the invisible filmmaker, as constituted through it. The film is a most elaborate detour to the self, opening the borders of autobiography to an expansive definition of an historical subjectivity.

The films addressed in chapter 2 also take a detour to the self, albeit one closer to home. Whereas Akerman’s family may haunt her text, these films all construct their autobiographical subject explicitly through and in relation to the family. In doing so, these “domestic ethnographies” insist, in effect, on the heterogeneous nature of self-representation.<sup>44</sup> The films considered in detail in this chapter are: *Nobody’s Business*, *Thank You and Goodnight*, *Everything’s for You*, *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, and *Phantom Limb*, though others, including *Daughter Rite*, *Tarnation*, and *Orders of Love*, are also addressed. The chapter begins by briefly analyzing the representation of the mainstream Jewish family, especially with regard to depictions of the Jewish mother and the Jewish grandmother, and considers the recasting of these codified types and roles in the films under consideration. The offspring (the filmmakers themselves) reveal themselves as perpetual children in relation to the family, even as the adult filmmakers display mastery of their craft. A child’s triumphalism is effected, whether in recutting home movie footage or revisioning dominant family narratives.

In several of the films, access to family and to ancestral history and/or Jewish heritage is held at a frustrating remove. The knowledge may seem easily available, yet it remains ultimately locked in or lost to memory, making it inaccessible to the filmmaker. A recalcitrant father nearly refuses to remember or even care to remember the family lineage, in *Nobody’s Business*. A dying grandmother no longer has the strength to transmit her “kitchen Judaism” to her granddaughter, in *Thank You and Goodnight*.<sup>45</sup> A noncommunicative father dies before he can disclose the details of his prewar life, populated as it was with another wife and two mysterious children, in *Everything’s for You*. And in *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, cultural, familial, and personal identity are on the

verge of collapse with the loss of a mother's memory from Alzheimer's disease. Loss is repeatedly thematized as death haunts these family "auto-biothanatoheterographies," with dead siblings, parents, grandparents, and ancestors continually resuscitated at twenty-four frames per second, all vying for space in the frame of self-construction.<sup>46</sup>

Although it seems that one's sense of Jewish identity is never constructed entirely outside the bounds of family, these films reveal the family to also be an impediment to any full or complete constitutive rendering of one's self as a subject in history (a quest already illusory and elusive). In these Jewish autobiographical films, the family becomes both necessary fiction and incomplete fantasy, simultaneously enabling and inhibiting any coherent semblance of cultural subjectivity. The films appear as attempts to improve upon or repair family narratives—a preliminary, personal step toward the Jewish mandate of *Tikkun Ha'Olam* (repair of the world), a step we might call *Tikkun Ha'Mishpakhah* (repair of the family).

Chapter 3 performs an autocritique of my autobiographical film, *Treyf*, made in collaboration with Cynthia Madansky. This chapter entails a close analysis of not only the film but the process of performing an autocritique, in what may be seen as a *treyf*—that is to say, unkosher—mixing of criticism and production. I avail myself of the opportunity to analyze my own film critically as a segue into a broader consideration of Jewish autobiographical film. The chapter raises questions, regarding the constitution and representation of self in first person film, that will be crucial for the rest of the study. These questions are complicated, in regard to *Treyf*, by the differing rhetorical positions occupied by the autobiographical *I* and the autocritical *I*; by the discrepant registers of the filmic and the written; and by the double-voicedness (indeed the multivocality) of a coauthored autobiography. The analysis of this film initiates the volume's discussions about problems of authenticity, nostalgia, tradition, identification, ambivalence, visibility, and dissent, all of which are taken up in various guises in the chapter that follows. Analyzing my own film allows me to consider these issues from a first person position, anatomizing my choices and strategies that bear on my understanding of the other first person films in this study. Indeed, my interest and investment in the films studied here come from a deeply engaged relationship, the result of struggling with many of the issues, and inventing my own solutions to the conundra, raised in the making of contemporary Jewish autoethnography.

In this chapter, the concept of *treyf*, a Judaic proscription, becomes a metaphor for the liminal space claimed both within the film and in the process of autocritique. In the film, our characters stand in dynamic

tension with the religious and Zionist traditions in which we were raised. Made in part to advance a dialogue within the American Jewish community on the ethical dilemma of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the film attempts to construct a credible Jewish “insider” to maximize its political effectivity, for we know full well that many factors, not least our queerness and our political perspective, contribute to our outsider status. We resemble Trinh T. Minh ha’s “deceptive insider/deceptive outsider”; that is to say, our position questions the rightful attribution of insider/outsider (“who gets to say what’s treyf? who’s treyf?” the film asks) and posits our characters as never fully insider nor ultimately outsider to the parameters that molded and shaped our oppositional yet engaged stance.<sup>47</sup> The insider/outsider logic also marks my act of autocritique, as I endeavor to analyze at some measure of distance a text and a tradition in which I am inevitably implicated.

*Treyf* is a queer film that takes its queerness for granted, preferring to interrogate notions of Jewishness from a queer perspective. Yet it does not entirely manage to portray both identities in dynamic relation. Rather, it reveals the difficulty of so doing. Chapter 4 looks at a range of queer Jewish first person films, which, like *Treyf*, fail, to one degree or another, to filmically integrate the two identities. This chapter considers the double movement of queer Jewish first person films that seem to assert their desire for queer and/or Jewish visibility while at the same time retreating into a haze of ambivalence and ambiguity. This queer/Jewish pairing is not arbitrarily chosen. Many of the filmmakers in this study identify or can be identified as queer, whether or not they treat sexuality thematically in their work. In addition, the two identities, homosexual and Jewish, have interrelated histories, making the pairing particularly intriguing. The films treated in this chapter are: *Cheap Philosophy*, *Rootless Cosmopolitans*, *Thank You and Goodnight*, *Treyf*, *Tarnation*, *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, and *Fast Trip*, *Long Drop*. Surprisingly but undeniably, in many of these films, queerness and Jewishness coexist uncomfortably in the frame. The pressures of visibility politics so prevalent in the Western gay rights movements since the 1970s do not translate directly into a clear queer Jewish aesthetic. There is a noticeable reticence on the part of some of these filmmakers to explore or even to reveal these identities explicitly in these films. For instance, both Akerman and Oxenberg are so circumspect about their sexuality in the films, that recourse to extratextual information is necessary. Others, like Hoffmann, are so subtle in reference to their Jewishness that I am prompted to analyze their silences on the subject symptomatically. Ambiguity and ambivalence, in terms of queer and/or Jewish articulations, become the common elements defining the films in this chapter.

Ambivalence is theorized in this chapter through sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's definition of Jews as modernity's ambivalent *other*. Bauman contends that, in modernity's ordering compulsion, the Jews have come to signify disorder and alterity by exceeding all national, racial, and class limits, the very categories that have obsessed modernity.<sup>48</sup> Similarly heterogeneous, though never mentioned by Bauman, queers are another of Western culture's consummate *others*. But, if Jews and queers can signify the excess of Western modernity, that which cannot be contained, classified, or bureaucratically regulated, then the ambivalence of self-representation witnessed in these films merely extends these claims. The queer Jewish filmmakers of this study often reproduce this state of ambivalence through a formal or thematic ambiguity that remains ultimately unresolved.

Identifying yet another ambivalence, the chapter makes connections between nineteenth-century tropes of the homosexual and of the Jew, and explores the risky reappropriation of the sickly, pathological nineteenth-century Jew in the contemporary first person film by queer, HIV-positive, Jewish filmmaker Gregg Bordowitz. Bordowitz refuses the by now bankrupt "positive images" strategy in favor of a defiantly sardonic "HIV-positive" one. Beneath his youthful good looks and strong, healthy demeanor is a sickly, sexually suspect Jewish man, dying to come out, as it were. Bordowitz, through his onscreen alter ego, Alter Allesman, reclaims the stereotype of the diseased and perverted Jew, and in doing so flies in the face of Jewish survival strategies of the last one hundred years. In Allesman's ethical rebelliousness, Bordowitz instantiates no trope so closely as the character who, when caught between the two ineluctable and unsavory poles of pariah or parvenu (available both to the nineteenth-century Jew and to the invert in the salons of Saint Germain), chooses the third option of the moral gadfly, Hannah Arendt's "conscious pariah."<sup>49</sup>

In concluding this volume, I look at a film that epitomizes some themes of this study yet takes them a step further. Barbara Myerhoff's *In Her Own Time* is ostensibly an ethnographic film about the Hasidic community in the Fairfax section of downtown Los Angeles, framed in the reflexive ethnographic practices that she helped to develop. The film, however, exceeds its rhetorical context and passes from the strategic reflexivity it deploys—meant to illuminate the practices and beliefs of the ethnographic subject—to a full-fledged autobiographical film, wherein the central focus shifts from the community to the filmmaker. This film, however, even exceeds the terms of traditional autobiographical film, since an implicit requirement of the genre is that the filmmaker survive at least as long as it takes to finish the film. A filmmaker may foreshadow or foretell

her or his own death; she or he may even stage it as Gregg Bordowitz does (stepping out into traffic in front of a bus), providing she or he lives to tell of the staging. In Myerhoff's case, the film was finished posthumously (by the only credited director of the film, Lynne Littman), making it in effect a communiqué from the grave. This is a clear instance of what Michael Renov in an unpublished paper has termed "assisted autobiography,"<sup>50</sup> yet I am captivated by the spirit of the film, which haunts like a revenant, a dybbuk who speaks to us from the other side through a figure who both is and is not the film's author. Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man have each theorized autobiography as thanatography, an epitaph and a death mask foreshadowing the imminent demise of the autobiographic subject, and this film literalizes that demise.<sup>51</sup>

Further, the film, with its head-on collision of secular and orthodox Jewish culture, stages a discomfiting reconciliation between what function for many contemporary Jews, and certainly for the filmmakers in this study, as opposing and irreconcilable forces. Not content to evoke Jewish tropes to create or affirm a bond with Jewishness, Myerhoff actually (if somewhat skeptically) invokes Jewish prayer and ritual. This film goes beyond articulating Jewishness autobiographically and attempts to embrace Judaism *halakhically*, as a way not only to preserve a tradition and a faith (the ethnographic salvage impulse to which Myerhoff, along with many others, was susceptible) but to preserve a self. This is Jewish autobiography *as* self-preservation, made as if her life depended on it. As lung cancer advances, Myerhoff turns in desperation to Jewish rites and rituals such as mikvah ritual purification and re-naming ceremonies to ward off the Malakh Hamavet (the Angel of Death). This particular Jewish autobiography has raised the stakes of Jewish self-representation literally to a matter of life and death.

The forms that these ethnoautobiographical films take, and the stories that they narrate, for the most part reveal a dynamic and ever adaptable subject-in-relation, continually negotiating the not always compatible forces of tradition, Jewish specificity, and (post)modern identity. What comes across in the collectivity of these films is the inventiveness of the filmmakers as they attempt, each in their own way, to represent Jewishness in the first person.



## Notes

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### Introduction

1. Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," 26.
2. Egan, "Encounters in Camera."
3. See Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*. Judith Butler has written, "The 'I' has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or set of relations—to a set of norms. . . . The subject forms itself in relation to a set of codes, prescriptions and norms. . . . There is no making of oneself (*poesis*) outside of a mode of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) and, hence, no self-making outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take" (my emphasis), in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 7–8 and 17, respectively.
4. One of the first articles ever written on autobiographical nonfiction film focused on avant-garde films. See "Autobiography in Avant-Garde Film," by P. Adams Sitney, 199–246.
5. Michael Renov makes reference to the "repression of subjectivity" in the introduction to *The Subject of Documentary*, xviii.
6. As a point of clarification, it is important that the reader understand that not all contemporary autobiographical film fits the description of "the new autobiography." There are many autobiographical films being made that do not construct subjectivity "as a site of instability" and in fact strive to represent it as a unified, coherent, narrative certainty, however much this may remain an illusion.
7. Renov, "The Subject in History," 110.
8. According to Leigh Gilmore, the literary memoir also boomed in the 1990s. See "Limit Cases," 128. First person films have proliferated nowhere so much as in the United States and Canada but the practice has become also more widespread elsewhere.
9. Renov, "The Subject in History," 107–8.
10. A secondary set of films will also be discussed that address Jewish subjectivity from an autobiographical perspective but that I do not analyze in the same detail. These films include *Below the New* (1999), by Abigail Child; *One of Us* (1999), by Susan Korda; *A Letter without Words* (1998), by Lisa Lewenz; *Paper Bridge* (1987), by Ruth Beckermann; *Chantal Akerman by Chantal Akerman* (1996); *Tomboychik* (1993), by Sandi DuBowski; *A Healthy Baby Girl* (1996), by Judith Helfand; *Divan* (2003), by Pearl Gluck. Still other films are referenced along the way. For a filmography of Jewish diasporic first person documentaries, see my filmography in the present volume.
11. Renov names it thus in "The Subject in History," 104–19. Renov is hardly the only one to use this "new" designation. The "new documentary" has also been hailed by theorists, including Linda Williams, "Mirrors without Memories," 9–21, and Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*. Examples of this "new autobiography" can be seen in some films of Marlon Fuentes, Cheryl Dunye, Elia Suleiman, Mona Hatoum, Kidlat Tahimik, Marilou Mallet, Marlon Riggs, Richard Fung, Gurinder Chadha, Su Friedrich, Rea Tajiri, Sadie Benning, David Achkar, Frances Negrón-Mutaner, and Karim Ainouz.
12. Norman Kleeblatt, the curator of the New York Jewish Museum's 1996 exhibition "Too Jewish?" writes in the preface of the show's catalogue, *Too Jewish?* "While multicultural exhibitions have abounded in the years since 1989, there has been little focus on Jewish artists or Jewish subject matter. The interrogation of this absence—and of what makes Jewish artists less marginal

- than other groups—was integral to the formulation of this exhibition.” The cultural climate, and new provocative works by Jewish artists, forced “me to confront my own cultural difference as a Jew and to figure out how different my ‘otherness’ was from the ‘otherness’ of any number of diverse minorities.” Kleeblatt, *Too Jewish?* x.
13. Such a postmodern representational approach has been identified also in the written narratives by children of survivors. Efraim Sicher writes, “In common with many postmodern texts, second generation narrative draws attention to the fragmentation of self, to the relativity of truth, to the fluidity of memory and to the impossibility of ever fully knowing.” “The Future of the Past,” 80–81.
  14. It was coined by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes*, 7, and has been used to great effect by Catherine Russell in the concluding chapter of *Experimental Ethnography*, 275–314.
  15. Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 276.
  16. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 293.
  17. The original quote is: “The ‘talking head’ must always belong—at some level—to a body politic.” See Chon Noriega, “Talking Heads, Body Politic,” 211.
  18. “Culture,” as Raymond Williams declared a quarter of a century ago, is one of the most complicated terms in the English language. As he and others have asserted, it has come to stand in for virtually everything humans do. In my usage, of course, I am unable to avoid significant slippage as my invocation has nothing pure, homogeneous, or authentic about it, and in fact I do mean for *culture* to stand in for many things. Culture has been usefully derided and demystified by many social scientists and theorists, most famously by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* and in Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn’s study *Culture*. For overviews of more contemporary debates within anthropology and cultural geography, see Susan Wright’s “Politicization of ‘Culture,’” 7–15, and Don Mitchell’s “There’s No Such Thing as Culture,” 102–16, respectively.
  19. Don Mitchell, citing Donna Haraway, describes culture as “infinite regress” (“There’s No Such Thing as Culture,” 107). I have relied heavily on Susanna Egan’s description of the “general category of autobiography” in this discussion (“Encounters in Camera,” 598).
  20. Noriega, “Talking Heads, Body Politic,” 207–28. Doris Sommer coined the phrase in reference to Latin American women’s written testimonies; see, “Not Just a Personal Story,” 107–30.
  21. Hannah Arendt usefully differentiates Jewishness from Judaism (the religion) in this way: “Jewish origin, without religious . . . connotation, became everywhere a psychological quality, [and] was changed into ‘Jewishness.’” This Jewishness devoid of its traditional historical significance has become an idiosyncrasy, which at times verges on obsession; as Arendt notes, “The more the fact of Jewish birth lost its religious, national and social-economic significance, the more obsessive Jewishness became; Jews were obsessed by it as one may be by a physical defect or advantage, and addicted to it as one may be to a vice.” *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 83–85.
  22. For an interesting discussion of the universalizing of the Jew, see Paul Eisenstein, “Universalizing the Jew.” For some of the best known philosophical allegorizations of the Jew, see Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”; Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew*; Jean-François Lyotard’s *Heidegger and “the jews.”*
  23. Elizabeth Bruss makes such a claim, with the backing of Walter Benjamin, Frank McConnell, and Stanley Cavell; see her “Eye for I,” 318 n. 30.
  24. J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 228.
  25. For a fascinating discussion of the stereotype in relation to the Jew, see Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*. For another important discussion of the stereotype, see Bhabha, “The Other Question,” 66–84.
  26. Stuart Klawans, “iCinema,” in *Nation*, October 18, 2004.
  27. With my detailed description, it should be obvious that such a film exists: *A Letter without Words* (1998), by Lisa Lewenz. Although this film is not one of the primary texts of my study, I do include it in secondary discussions and in the filmography. The reasons for not choosing to analyze this film in depth have nothing to do with the Jewishness of the filmmaker, but rather with an overly simplified address of the first person in the film’s narration (see my fifth criterion). There are other films, included in my filmography, made by filmmakers with only a Jewish father, such as by Mark Wexler, whose famous filmmaking father, Haskell Wexler, is Jewish, and whose mother is not.
  28. The least formally innovative film of this study, *In Her Own Time*, is the one film that most directly negotiates the terms of religious practice. Films such as *Hiding and Seeking* (2003), by Menachem Daum and Oren Rudovsky, and *My Brother’s Wedding* (2003), by Dan Akiva, are important first person films in many ways but are, not surprisingly, conservative in their aesthetic approach. There are notable exceptions, however, including *Divan* (2003), by Pearl Gluck, a playful treasure hunt mystery that cleverly weaves in the complexity of leaving the Hassidic fold while still retaining strong, if ambivalent ties to it; and works by Anat Zuria in Israel—I mention

- especially her *Purity* (2002) since it is a first person film—whose films are visually arresting and surprisingly nonconformist on many levels, made by an intriguing ultra-orthodox filmmaker with a nascent feminist sensibility.
29. Berliner has made a film about his maternal grandfather (who began as a cotton exporter in Egypt), *Intimate Stranger* (1991), but this is a much more distant, almost clinical, portrait that does not begin to develop the personal voice with the intensity and passion of Berliner's later films.
  30. There have, of course, been more than a few first person films made by Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews to date: *Love Iranian-American Style* (2005) and *Najib* (2000), by Tanaz Eshaghian; *Adio Kerida*, by Ruth Behar (2002); *I Miss the Sun* (1983), by Mary Halawani; *Nana, George, and Me* (1998), by Joe Balass; *Nana: A Portrait* (1972), by Jamil Simon. As this book was going to press, two very interesting new first person documentaries by Mizrahi diasporic Jews had been released: *The Rabbi's Twelve Children*, by Yael Bitton (Switzerland, 2007), and Nadi Kamel's *Salata Baladi* (Egypt, 2007). Although Simone Bitton's fascinating film *Wall* came out in 2004 and was co-produced by France, I consider it to be an Israeli film and, as such, not appropriate for this study.
  31. Quoted from Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's presentation at the second Eye and Thou conference, sponsored by New York University, March 24–25, 2001.
  32. Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish*, 300.
  33. Renov refers to Vertov's wife and brother as "the delegates of his projected subjectivity." Renov discusses these films, among others, as prototypes of contemporary autobiographical documentaries. See *The Subject of Documentary*, xviii. A longer discussion of the origins of autobiographical documentary in America can be found in the first chapter of Jim Lane's *Autobiographical Documentary in America*, 11–32.
  34. Of course, some of the best-known practitioners of direct cinema were Jewish (Frederick Wiseman, the Maysles brothers). I don't mean to imply here that Jews are somehow unable to maintain the illusion or artifice of objectivity that their non-Jewish counterparts can. Certainly countless Jewish scientists, doctors, journalists, and documentarists attest otherwise. Yet it is worth noting that the Maysles, in particular, and from very early on, infused their direct cinema with a personal, engaged quality far from the journalistic tenets espoused by Robert Drew in his three rules of the "school of storm and stress": (1) I am determined to be there when news happens; (2) I am determined to be as unobtrusive as possible; (3) I am determined not to distort the situation. Of course no direct cinema practitioners could ever fully succeed in the task as Drew defined it, and the resultant infractions have been duly noted in the scholarly writings on the subject, notably by Jeanne Hall (see her "Realism as a Style in Cinema Verité"), but I have yet to see an elaborated argument about how the Maysles' exceptional work radically deviated from those norms even as they claimed to pursue them. The clearest example of their interactive, psychological, and most certainly not disinterested approach is their film *Grey Gardens* (1976).
  35. Together they made *Happy Mother's Day* (1963).
  36. The concept of the feminist theory film is elaborated in Kaplan's *Women and Film*, 125–41.
  37. Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*.
  38. She can be said to be yet another instance of Naomi Seidman's "parenthetical Jew," who allies herself with political causes and cultures that may or may not include an aspect of her own identity, but neglects to include, or intentionally excludes, reference to her Jewishness. She may reveal her Jewishness (if at all) as an aside, at times literally marked off in parentheses. Although Seidman only concerns herself with a small sampling of feminist (Jewish) theorists (Nancy K. Miller, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler—all of whom have since been quite explicit about their Jewishness) the phenomenon is evident among filmmakers as well. Jewish filmmaking, perhaps unlike recent queer and/or feminist theory by Jews, has begun to come out of the parentheses. Ambivalence is still pervasive, a fact that is detailed throughout this thesis, but Jewishness has gone from being an incidental aside to a theme in and of itself, ranging from major to minor. See Seidman, "Fag Hags and Bu-Jews," 254–68.
  39. Beginning in 1996, the National Foundation for Jewish Culture (NFJC) in the United States established a documentary film fund that has since funded numerous autobiographical Jewish films. The initial seed money for this fund came from a \$450,000 grant from Stephen Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation. This targeted Jewish documentary fund has supported such Jewish first person films as: *Treyf*, *A Healthy Baby Girl*, *The Return of Sarah's Daughters*, *One of Us*, *A Letter without Words*, *The March*, *Divan*, *King of the Jews*, *My Architect*, *Hiding and Seeking*. It is important to point out that the fund only provides partial funding, leaving these filmmakers to raise the bulk of their budgets elsewhere. The NFJC funds nonautobiographical documentaries as well. See [http://www2.jewishculture.org/disciplines/media\\_arts/](http://www2.jewishculture.org/disciplines/media_arts/). To my knowledge, no such targeted Jewish documentary fund exists in Europe. Most of the films discussed at length in this study, with the exception of *Treyf*, did not benefit from NFJC funding.
  40. Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," 197.
  41. Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," 255, 263.

42. F. Ginsburg, "The Parallax Effect," 17.
43. Ibid.
44. Renov coins the term *domestic ethnography* in his essay "Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the 'Other' Self," 216–29.
45. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Kitchen Judaism," 75–105.
46. This is Jacques Derrida's neologism; see *Circumfession*, 213.
47. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, 74.
48. This argument is encapsulated in Bauman's article "Allosemitism," 143–56.
49. The term is actually borrowed from Bernard Lazare. See Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 65, n. 26.
50. Renov used this term in a presentation at the second Eye and Thou conference, New York University, March 2001. Another, more famous example of the assisted autobiography is Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman's *Silverlake Life* (1993), though the conceit of Joslin finishing the film postmortem is never indulged and it is explicit within the film that it is Peter Friedman who finishes it.
51. Derrida does so in relation to Nietzsche's preface to *Ecce Homo*, in "Otobiographies," 1–38, and in discussion with Eugene Donato, *ibid.*, 54–59. De Man does so in his brief but influential essay "Autobiography as De-Facement," 67–81.

### 1. Memory Once Removed

1. Finkelkraut, *Imaginary Jew*.
2. "On D'Est," by Chantal Akerman, 22.
3. Benjamin, "N," 49.
4. Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," 28.
5. *Ibid.*, 26.
6. Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*.
7. Benjamin, "N," 43.
8. These seemingly random tropes have distinct motivations, according to Akerman, some feminist, others related to Jewish thematics, and still others classifiable in formalist terms. There is some overlap in these categories: for instance, obsessiveness and repetition resonate as Jewish concerns, certainly as psychoanalytic ones, and also adhere to certain formalist constraints.
9. *Jewish*, in this book, as in common usage, at times refers to culture, at other times specifies the religion and its traditions, and at still others may imply an identity position occupied by individual Jews. In general, however, I try to use *Judaism* (sometimes modified by *rabbinic* or *traditional*) when discussing religious and traditional concerns. When referring to cultural aspects or expression, I tend to use the term *Jewishness*, which, following Arendt among others, I use to entail an active engagement with Jewish identity. I feel compelled to clarify that, with this usage, I am in no way implying an inherency or innate tendency of Jews to any particular type of Jewishness or to Jewishness at all. Any meaningful discussion about Jewish identity must rest not on essentialist conceptions of Jewishness, but rather on culturally constructed and historically fluctuating definitions of what Jewishness may be.
10. Akerman is well aware of this parable and chose to begin her film *American Stories* by recounting it in voice-over. She identifies herself as that character in this scene.
11. Janet Bergstrom has noted its recurrence in Akerman's *News From Home* (1976) and *Meetings with Anna*. (Bergstrom, "Invented Memories," 109.)
12. *Ibid.* This statement echoes Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin's concept of Jewish diasporic identity, in which "displacement of loyalty from place to memory of place" occurs. See Boyarin and Boyarin, "Diaspora," 719.
13. David, "D'Est," 62.
14. Halbreich and Jenkins, introduction to *Bordering on Fiction*, 8–9. Akerman reads only the second half of the commandment (Exodus 20, 4–7), omitting 1–3. It has been suggested that the installation engages in the deconstruction of the process of filmmaking itself, beginning with the edited film, moving into disparate clips, and ending with the abstract concept that subtends the project. See Kristine Butler's review of the installation in *Post-Modern Culture*.
15. Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 12.
16. Although the images are not, strictly speaking, abstract, the portrait of the place as a whole emerges in shapes and patterns and registers viscerally, more than rationally or linearly as would a more representational portrait.
17. With regard to this notion of respectful distance from the subject and the look (or point of view) of the camera, Akerman has very distinct opinions. In an interview she gave about her film *Jeanne Dielman*, she commented on the shooting style: "You always know who is looking; you always know what the point of view is, all the time. It's always the same. But still, I was looking with a great deal of attention and the attention wasn't distanced. It was not a neutral look—