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Fleeing from Documentary: autobiographical film/video and the "ethics of responsibility"¹

by Michelle Citron

Introduction:

In documentary film or videomaking every shot is charged with ethical implications and choices. That is why early on in my career I made the decision to create fictions with actors whom were paid to deliver the words that I wrote. I thought I'd just avoid the ethical quandaries. But this fiction didn't wholly solve the problem either. For there, at the end of the production process, at the moment of exhibition lurked another set of ethical issues -- my responsibilities in relation to my audience.

Bill Nichols articulates this distinction well arguing that interactive documentary texts acknowledge the encounter between filmmaker and subject, and thus foreground their ethical relationship. While reflexive documentary texts which question representation itself, and he includes my own film Daughter Rite here, foreground the relationship between the filmmaker and audience.² I evolved my filmmaking style to flee from the problems of the first and engage in the issues of the second. What I want to do

is take a second look at both spaces of responsibility, particularly as shaped by the autobiographical film.

Part 1: My family

With the autobiographical act the personal moves into the cultural, the private becomes the social. Acknowledging this, John and Judith Katz defend autobiographical filmmaking "in terms of the public's right to know. Private life at the end of the twentieth century is surrounded by a high degree of secrecy...We compare ourselves to myths, not reality....The value of knowing, in more realistic fashion, about other people's interior lives is unquestionable."³ Autobiographical films and videos bear witness to our lives in all its variation, and these lives are untidy and contradictory: we have passions, both creative ones and destructive one; we betray each other and do surprisingly heroic things; we experience profound joy and almost crushing emotional pain; we are both cruel and compassionate. All these experiences and feelings fuel the autobiographical act. Because of this, the autobiographical film or video can break a silence and by doing so lessen the isolation and despair that we often experience, both personally and culturally.

The comfort that comes from knowing other peoples' lives is an important function of many autobiographical films and videos, from the white middle-class observational documentaries of the seventies (Joyce Chopra's Joyce at 34;

Amalie Rothchild's Nana, Mom, and Me) to the more multi-cultural, mixed modes autobiographies of recent years (Wei-Ssu Chien's A Woman Waiting for Her Period, Rea Tajiri's History and Memory, Aarin Burch's Spin Cycle).

The honest autobiographical film or video publicly speaks about the socially hidden: gay sexuality (Jennifer Montgomery's Age 12: Love with a Little L); being disabled (Jacqui Duckworth's A Prayer Before Birth); or violence against women (Margie Strosser's Rape Stories). This is the implicit threat that autobiography poses to the status quo. As a culture, we have been little able to tolerate the truth of the variety of lived experience, a that truth threatens the social order.

The autobiographical act is historically significant for women, and all others, who have traditionally lacked either a voice or a public forum for their speaking. Francoise Lionnet in writing about women's autobiographical novels notes that women are "consumed by need to find their past, to trace lineages that will empower them to live in the present, to rediscover histories occluded by HISTORY."⁴ It is in this sense that the autobiographical act is a political act, something we should not lose sight of since women's autobiography is often labeled confessional. This label denigrates as in: the trashy "True Confessions" magazines of the fifties, or the 900 phone lines of nineties. There is a class, as well as a gender, dimension here; the middle class thinks it rude to air dirty laundry

in public, that social decorum requires that secrets remain hidden.

The confessional label dismisses autobiographical film as being inappropriate for public display, at best self-indulgent, at worst narcissistic. One male critic was overheard telling another at Amsterdam's 1990 World Wide Video Festival that Vanalyne Green's A Spy in the House that Ruth Built was "impressive but awfully confessional."⁵ Compare this to J. Hoberman's praise of Ross McElwee's Sherman's March for its "delirious excess of libido that makes life worth living."⁶ A Spy In the House that Ruth Built has as much libido as Sherman's March; Green finds a pleasure in men's derrieres that is equal to the pleasure that McElwee has for women's breasts. Green's crime is that she dares to be the female voyeur in a territory claimed by men. Her exploration of female desire isn't missed by female critics, who praise the video for revealing that which has remained private for too long.⁷ Is this simply a case of each critic defending his/her own? I suspect that power still follows the male: on the issue of self-disclosure, the female is criticized for her narcissism, while the male is lauded for his courageous vulnerability.

To confess means "to disclose something damaging or inconvenient to oneself."⁸ Confession implies guilt. A criminal confesses and pays the penalty for doing so. With women's autobiographical film just what, precisely, are we guilty of? And who, exactly, pays?

An autobiographical work risks exposing that which the culture wants silenced. I completed What You Take For Granted..., a film that speaks explicitly of harassment toward women in the workplace, in the year of my tenure review. I feared that the perfect punishment a disapproving Father could enact on an indiscreet Daughter was the denial of her tenure. This particular fear was not realized, though teaching at an institution that had not yet fully embraced Women's Studies nor awarded many women tenure, neither was it unreasonable. Others have been less lucky. As history has shown us, when a film is too threatening funding can be withheld, exhibition denied, voices silenced.⁹

There is a personal dimension of risk at work here as well. The autobiographical film or video is intimately bound to the filmmaker's psyche, a site where guilt and projection lurk. When I completed Daughter Rite I didn't show it to my mother for many years. My guilt for making it was fueled by a fear that she would withdraw her love upon viewing the film since it spoke the secret of a daughter's anger towards her mother. Here my fear was more expressive of my guilt than of my mother's character, as she is one of the rare non-judgmental people I know. When she finally viewed the film, her actual reaction was something I could have never imagined.

An autobiographical work is connected to the pre-existing tensions in a video or filmmaker's life. This

makes the issues surrounding autobiographical media complex because the life that exists outside the piece is as important, if not more so, than the piece itself. It is in this dynamic relationship that exists between the media work and the artist's life that the ethical dimension dwells.

Autobiography can be dangerous to others, particularly those on whom the video or filmmaker turns her camera. Lovers, spouses, children, parents, and friends can find themselves suddenly appropriated as subjects into the autobiographical artist's celluloid or tape presentation of "self." An autobiographical artist uses her own life and the lives of others in the service of her art. Immediately an ethical responsibility arises. It is one thing for me to be an exhibitionist, quite another to turn my camera voyeuristically on those close to me, exhibiting their lives for the pleasure of strangers.

I was first confronted with this ethical dilemma in my documentary film Parthenogenesis. At the time I was transitioning from the field of psychology to that of media, and was in the process of redefining myself as a filmmaker. As a woman it was a lonely and isolated struggle. This chaotic moment in my life motivated Parthenogenesis, a film about three women artists: my violinist sister, Vicki Citron; her concert violinist teacher, Rosemary Harbison; and my filmmaker self.

The film, shot over the course of five consecutive days, shows the process of my sister and her teacher trying to learn Bach's Double Violin Concerto in D minor. Cut into these sessions are conversations between Vicki, Rosie, and myself on the various problems we encountered as women in the arts: working with men who trivialized us, the shadow of the virtuoso tradition, the ways in which institutions limited our visions and actions, and our own self-censors.

This was a intimate shoot comprised of only the three of us. I taught my sister how to mic a shot and everyone lugged the equipment. At those moments when I entered into the discussion I would lock down the camera, come out from behind, and sit down with the other two women at the table.

But acknowledging my presence by actively participating in the discussions was not enough. Fully committed to both Marxist and Feminist politics, I was acutely aware of the power relationship that was created between the filmmaker and her subjects in the making of documentary film. Determined to subvert that relationship I designed the following scheme.

Parthenogenesis was shot on the now ancient and crude half inch open reel video format, and later transferred the tape to film for editing and exhibition. This technology allowed for a broader conceptual control among all the participants. Every morning I would tape Vicki and Rosie learning and rehearsing the concerto. And each afternoon was spent with the "subjects" watching the previous day's

rushes, collectively discussing the issues they raised, and taping whatever conversation we decided to have in response. Each successive morning's shoot was shaped by the previous afternoons group discussion in which we all equally participated. This would, I believed, give my sister and her teacher power over their representation.

The two women, especially my sister, were also involved in the film's editing. They watched successive cuts and their input greatly influenced the final film's structure and meaning. Much later, of course, I understood that this complicated process was successful at the level of the content and the aural track only. The conversation in front of the camera was mutually agreed upon through long discussion among the three of us. As musicians, Vicki and Rosie both had expertise on the musical content of the film; in these matters I followed their lead. However, they were not as sophisticated about images; being behind the camera, I controlled the film's visualization. And, it is Rosie, and not my sister, that my camera favors. The two are positioned in such a way that in order for Vicki to talk to Rosie she must turn towards her and away from the camera; for most of the film, it is Rosie's animated face and my sister's back, that the viewer sees.

The production process for Parthenogenesis had a second benefit as well. Because my sister and Rosie were so intimately involved in the process, I believed the issue of consent was nullified. Voluntary and informed consent is

perhaps at the heart of the video or filmmaker's ethical responsibility to the subject in documentary.¹⁰ And although one can endlessly question whether or not subjects can ever really have informed consent, this is at least one ethical issue with both a long history of debate and well developed procedures¹¹ With an autobiographical piece, however, informed consent becomes quite murky.

Most autobiographical films and videos are about the family.¹² And as John and Judith Katz argue, levels of intimacy, trust, as well as the specific dynamics within families greatly complicate the ethical issues. Katz and Katz make the case that in autobiography, the maker has a greater responsibility towards her subjects because being family subjects, the artist usually has undue influence. After Daughter Rite I made an Mother Right, a documentary video of my mother discussed below. In my most cynical moments I know this tape was easy to make because my mother would do almost anything for me: I am her daughter and she loves me.

Love, guilt, desire to help, all the convoluted feelings that infuse familiar relationships, influence the maker/subject dynamics in most autobiographical films and videos. This is because the film or tape enters into the already pre-existing relationship between the artist and her family "subjects." And this can have an unpredictable, and often unknowable, influence on the film being shot. In Parthenogenesis Rosie is the seasoned performer, aware of

the camera and in control of her persona. My sister, much younger, seems vulnerable in her unfolding formation. Early in the film Vicki admits doubts about her talent, her drive, and her goals. She tells Rosie, "Finally it's just come down to me confronting myself. And I don't know if I can do it." Now watching the film, I suspect that I unconsciously used my big-sister influence to convince Vicki to participate; I needed a stand-in to work through my own insecurities as a woman artist. And, I suspect that my sister's eagerness to play with the older women artists made her vulnerable, in turn, to that influence.

In autobiographical video or filmmaking, the artist can't just walk away from her subjects when the project is finished. The relationship extends beyond the moment of shooting; both the maker and her family knows this. Whatever happens in front of the camera must be lived with, by the artist and her family, for the rest of their lives together. What kind of subtle censorship shapes the autobiographical work for this reason alone: an answer hedged, a feeling unexpressed, an experience left unspoken? At the other extreme, what type of hyperbolic moments occur in these works precisely because of the camera's presence and a desire, by at least one of the participants, to act out for the camera what can't be acknowledged behind closed doors?

All of these concerns played a major role in my flight from documentary into fiction film. I created fiction

because of the ethical discomfort experienced in exhibiting someone else's life, despite their willingness to do so. I created autobiographical fiction because of a driving need to use my life as a case study and, unable to flee from my subjects once the filming was over, was protective of both them and myself. Fiction was the escape hatch.

Over the years, I've steadfastly maintained that Daughter Rite is not autobiographical. After all, I told myself and anyone else who asked the question, I had interviewed many daughters prior to writing the film, and later hired actors to speak the text. The film was about mothers and daughters in general, not my mother and her daughters specifically. Through this semantic slight of hand, I let myself off the hook. Of course, the reality of the film's verisimilitude is more complex.

Daughter Rite contains different approaches to the autobiographical act, both documentary and fictional. The taxonomy lays out this way. At one end lies the autobiographical references that have fidelity to the details of my life. In Daughter Rite, these are the documentary images represented by actual filmic documents shot by my father -- the home movies. Historically, most film or video autobiographies are cinema verite and fit into this category.

A second category has fidelity to the details of other women's lives: the stories told to me by the thirty-five daughters I interviewed for the film. These stories are

clearly not autobiographical, yet they could have remained as documentary interviews surrounding the more autobiographical elements of the film. Instead, I transformed these interviews into material that is scripted and acted. I think of this material as having fidelity to the details of women's lives in general (mine included), however, reworked. The scene where Stephanie tells of the rape by her step-father is an example of this. The story, told to me by a sixteen year old woman, has faithfulness to both that woman's life and the interview she gave. The only changes were made in order to fit the story into Stephanie's character and the film's narrative line. Given the highly charged nature of the material, I felt more comfortable having an actress, rather than the young woman, speak the story.

Finally, there is the material that is totally imagined: the scene where Maggie and Stephanie make salad; the sisters rifling through their absent mother's bureau; the Narrator describing her mother's depression.

Yet, this taxonomy is misleading; the film is untidy in a way that my categorization belies. In Daughter Rite, there is no predictable relationship between the above categories and the various aesthetic elements of the film. For instance, the mother reading the daughter's mail as well as her divorce from the father and move to Hawaii, are all details from my own life. Yet, the first appears as a story related by the sisters in one of the faux documentary

scenes, and the later is told by the Narrator. And the dreams, visually represented through the most manipulated images in the film, are as authentic as the home movies, being that I actually dreamt them.

Ultimately however, these categories insufficiently express the autobiographical nature of the film, for it is in the emotional texture that the film is truly autobiographical. The passive aggressive power struggle that threads through Maggie and Stephanie's relationship resonates off my own family experience. And the daughters' anger towards their mother is an emotion I must own. The film represents only a narrow band of the full feeling spectrum that is my relationship with my mother. Yet a core of my lived experience fuels the fiction in a way similar to that real bit of sand that precipitates the pearl. Though, as with the sand and the pearl, at first glance their relationship isn't self-evident. The fictional form of these broadly defined autobiographical elements situates my personal experience in a larger cultural context and simultaneously lets me off the hook.

Viewers of Daughter Rite assume that the Mother character portrayed in the film is my own mother. This audience response caused me much guilt over the film. I felt that I had betrayed my mother, both by allowing my anger towards her to show in the film and by implying that the depressed Mother in the film represented her. My guilt was further exacerbated since I knew that I encouraged this

response with the use of a first person, filmmaker, narrator. Perhaps, this narrating device was a way to clue the audience into the autobiographical nature of this fictional work. Perhaps, it was my strategy to have it both ways: I could make an autobiographical film, while at the same time denying its autobiographical nature.

Mother Right was made to assuage my guilt over Daughter Rite; to enable my mother her voice. My working class mother is straight talker, some would say alarmingly direct, and as such, she is a lively and compelling film subject. After divorcing my father, she moved to Hawaii and spent the next fifteen years working in a prominent gay restaurant and bar in Honolulu. She herself is straight.

In Mother Right my mother talks frankly about her existence in this gay environment: what attracts her to it, why she finds it emotionally satisfying, and how her straight friends react. The tape, shot in the early pre-AIDS eighties, shows my mother at work in the bar and restaurant, planning the annual gay pride party with her gay friends, the party itself complete with strippers, and socializing with her straight friends. My mother is proud of her life and wanted very much to make the tape. As she tells a bar patron and friend of hers on camera:

"You know when she shows Daughter Rite, people question her, 'is that what your mother's really like?'

She's gonna prove to them, that's *not*
what I'm really like."

My mother was emotionally involved with the gay men she came into daily contact with as co-workers and customers. They were also her friends. Once AIDS hit the gay community she became very active in fighting the epidemic. She raised consciousness in the straight community, raised money for the local AIDS foundation, and, sadly, helped her friends die. Deserted by their own mothers, my mother became the adult who parented these men through their final days: feeding them homemade soup, listening to their fears, visiting them in the hospital, attending their memorials. I believe my love and respect for her informs Mother Right.

I rarely show this video since I lack releases from some of the people who talked, sang, and danced before my lens. Yet on those rare occasions when it's been screened, I've been surprised at viewer response -- many were critical of my mother as portrayed in the film. This negative response is usually made up of different threads: outright homophobia focused on my mother; covertly expressed discomfort towards the male gay life explicitly portrayed in the tape; and anxiety created by a woman who left home and family to follow her own desires and, as a heterosexual woman, spends much of her libido on what is considered an inappropriate object -- gay men. My loving

point of view towards my mother, carefully inscribed on the screen, is inconsequential.

Paradoxically, Daughter Rite, made exclusively from the daughter's point of view, consciously permits a significant amount of criticism of the daughters as self-absorbed and viewers often defend the mother against these ungrateful offspring. While Mother Right, meant to express the mother's point of view, leaves her vulnerable to criticism despite my conscious intentions. Thus, audiences often read into the films the opposite of what I intended. My mother, I know, would find this reaction confusing and upsetting.

Obviously, audience response to any video or film is both multi-variable and unpredictable. This uncertainty, however, takes on ethical weight in documentary pieces where real lives are exhibited. Unless a subject is media sophisticated, and few people including my family are, what significance does informed consent really carry? And what right do I have to display them to audiences in often unpredictable ways? These questions are further intensified for me in autobiography where I'm intimately attached to the people being filmed and taped. The tension that exists between respecting the rights of others and speaking the unspeakable, what is often labeled the right to privacy versus the right to know, is solved by fiction.

The question arises: what compels a film or videomaker to create an autobiographical work? The autobiographical

impulse is obviously motivated by multiple sources. Briefly, my own work is fueled by a desire to understand my life in relation to larger cultural forces, as well as, a yearning for presence in the world. Why, for me, these needs take the form of the autobiographical act, and not some other equally appropriate form, is not my subject here. What is of interest is the function of fiction in my choice: fiction gives me distance on a subject -- myself -- which I often have precious little distance on.

The Canadian videomaker, Lisa Steele, writes, "To convert one's life into a process is the process of autobiography." By turning one's life into such a process, new possibilities for self understanding open up. Francoise Lionnet in describing women's autobiographical fictional writing says it this way:

The narrator's process of reflection, narration, and self-integration within language [and I include film and video here] is bound to unveil patterns of self definition (and self-dissimulation) which may seem new and strange and which we are not always familiar. The self engendered on the page allows a writer to subject a great deal of her ordinary experience to new scrutiny and to show that the polarity fact/fiction does not establish and constitute absolute

categories of feeling and perceiving reality. The narrative text epitomizes this duality in its splitting of the subject of discourse into a narrating self and an experience of self which can never coincide exactly.¹³

Lionnet calls the gap created by this split a "space of possibility where the subject of history and the agent of discourse can engage in dialogue with each other."¹⁴ I am particularly interested in the dialogue set up in this "space of possibility," this space which opens up both at both a personal and an interpersonal site.

Personally, fiction gives voice to my unconscious, allowing me to have a dialogue between that which I know, and that which I don't even know that I know.¹⁵ From this dialogue, insight springs. At the end of Daughter Rite the narrator relates a dream about her dying sister, which reads in part:

"I go home to Mom. Nancy is there and asks to be killed. She says to set her on fire. I do, and she melts very slowly. It is terrifying to watch, especially her face melting. Mom is wonderful. She really helps, talking to Nancy as she burns, stoking the fire...Finally I cannot take it any longer...I leave. Nancy is dead, but not totally burned up. I know I should stay 'til the very end, but I just

can't....I need to be alone. I am scared and upset...I go home, hoping Nancy's body is gone. It is gone. Mom waited until it burned completely, then smashed it up and buried it in the marsh. She has done this terrible task so that I wouldn't have to do it. I am very grateful. I wander over to her, she holds me in her arms and I start to cry."

In the images that play under this narration, the mother looks almost heroic. She struts down the walk, pivots at the end of a pier, and moves towards the camera, over and over in different shots filmed at various locations. This mother owns the environment through which she moves; the montage is made of images from the mother's point of view. She is alone in the frame, independent of the daughter, whose film this has been. The last shot in the sequence is the one exception. In it, the mother puts her arm around her daughter and, in long shot, they walk together across an empty field. Placed as the final shot in the mother's montage, this image allows the filmmaker daughter to project her desire for mother love onto the mother, while pretending these feelings are from the mother's point of view.

I wrote this segment to illustrate the daughter's belief in her mother's willingness to care for her: a fantasy of sacrificial, mother love. But the scene hints at a darker desire as well -- my murderous competition with my

sister for my mother's affection, a wish I was not consciously aware of at the time. In the fiction, created through the free play of imagination, that which was hidden is made visible. In the words of Adrienne Rich, the film allowed me "to remember what it has been forbidden even to mention."¹⁶ In this fictitious moment the possibility for knowledge, and thus change, opens up before me.

Interpersonally, a different space of possibility is created through autobiographical fiction. As mentioned above, my mother didn't view Daughter Rite until years after the film's completion. The day after the screening, my mother took me aside and altered our lives forever. She disclosed a painful secret that I had never known and that she had never revealed to anyone else before: the ongoing sexual abuse she had experienced as a child. This revelation driven, she said, by the viewing of *Daughter Rite*, significantly changed my relationship with my mother and my own sense of place in the world. In that moment a "space of possibility" opened up: a place of dialogue between my mother and me that gave a new degree of consciousness to both our relationship and our individual lives.

Fiction provides a much needed space of denial that I and my family can inhabit when it's psychologically necessary or convenient to deny that what I speak is referential. No one is fooled, but this trick we play with each other is essential. It allowed my mother to hold her

secret until she was willing to disclose it. A documentary film might have confronted my mother to speak before she was ready, and furthermore, it would have put me in control of the moment of confrontation. Perhaps, she never would have spoken. Daughter Rite motivated the telling of secrets, fiction allowed mother to choose her own time and place. The process was one of illumination, not accusation.

Autobiographical fiction presents a paradox. It allows for more authenticity, by giving voice to that which we both consciously and unconsciously know. Yet, at the same time, it works by deception, which ironically, by opening up a space of safety, may ultimately lead to honesty and truth.

Part 2: My audience

Making autobiographical fiction shifted my ethical responsibility away from the subjects in the film and toward the audience. This was enhanced by my use of fiction, disguised as cinema verite, to deliberately confront the audience with their assumptions of documentary verisimilitude and the expectations that flowed from that belief.

Documentary film and video, which presents an historical subject up on the screen, often pushes the audience away. For example, I react differently when I know that's an authentic dead body I'm seeing and not just an actor pretending to be dead. Hence, my great distress and

difficulty in sitting through Stan Brakage's film The Act of Seeing through one's own eyes, a film in which autopsies are recorded by the unflinching camera.¹⁷ The authentic dead bodies in this film produce shock and distancing for me the viewer. The dead bodies performed by actors in the latest Hollywood blockbuster, on the other hand, can allow for an easier play of identification since there is always the awareness that these bodies aren't really dead.

Documentary potentially sets up a dichotomy between us and them; we sit in the audience as voyeurs and watch someone else's life unfold. It is all too easy to think, "It's just their problem, it's goddamn for sure not mine. I've never been raped, or have AIDS, or...(fill in the blank)." Ironically, a fictional character potentially allows for greater identification because our knowledge of their fictional nature makes such identification safer. The character is not "real" so we can experience the overlaps without having to actually be too much like them.

I once screened Daughter Rite in a class I was teaching for non-Radio/Television/Film students at Northwestern University. I started the discussion by asking them what they felt after viewing the film. One woman said that the film made her angry, especially the moment where the character, Stephanie, talks about being raped by her stepfather. She said that she had never been raped herself so her response wasn't "personal," rather, she believed that she empathized with a real woman and felt betrayed

when she discovered she otherwise. I want to further explore this idea of betrayal.

This student invested her empathy in what she believed was an authentic woman and felt betrayed when she found out Stephanie was a fiction performed by an actress. Part of this betrayal might lie in the investment the student had in experiencing herself as someone with empathy and largesse towards another. Daughter Rite evoked that feeling, then deprived her of it. Part of her reaction might simply be a wounding to her sense as a sophisticated film viewer. By manipulating the codes, Daughter Rite broke the filmic contract and this student might have felt foolish that she fell for it. Even though there is a social reality to the scene, in its referentiality to both an interviewee's life and a statistical fact of our culture,¹⁸ it was the filmic reality that held importance for this woman.

Audiences have a psychological investment in the aesthetic codes and contracts of a film being reliable.¹⁹ They want their media to be accurately labeled. They want truth in advertising: this is a real woman telling them a real story in an authentic documentary; or, this is fiction; or, this is autobiographical fiction; or, these are clearly inscribed documentary scenes within fiction.²⁰ They feel safe because what they see matches what they're told they're seeing, to be told otherwise is to feel crazy. We all want to feel this safety, allowing of course, for

those moments of pleasure we find in roller coaster rides. Daughter Rite violates this safety, particularly since it is not a cool and detached text; it is an emotional look at the mother/daughter relationship rife with the feelings experienced by many in families. The film's emotional intensity might make a viewer feel particularly vulnerable, increasing her desire and need for safety, making the betrayal felt even deeper.

I tried to obviate this betrayal of the audience in What You Take for Granted... by deliberately designing the film to deconstruct its aesthetic in a more obvious way. Starting with the transcripts from forty interviews, I scripted a film about women, both working class and professional, who labored in jobs traditionally held by men. The film begins with six characters who talk in direct camera address about their experiences on the job. Ten minutes into the film two of the "talking heads," the truck driver and the doctor, start interacting in a story shot in a somewhat conventional narrative fiction style.

I anticipated that this contrived narrative, populated with two characters who were also seen in sequences coded as documentary, would make the film's aesthetic strategy easy to read. The only authentic documentary footage in What You Take for Granted... are two short montage sequences of women working that open and close the film. I hoped that the existence of this authentic documentary footage (unique in the film in both its visual style and

what it depicts -- different women than the "talking heads" laboring) would bring the fictitious nature of the rest of the film into even greater relief.

Audiences have had different and creative ways to read the construction of the film. Some saw what was intended: that all the characters and the entire film, except for the opening and closing montages, are fiction. Some believed that the four characters seen exclusively in the interviews were historical subjects in authentic documentary sequences while the truck driver and the doctor were actors, both in the narrative and the interview scenes. Yet even others believed that all the women were authentic documentary subjects and that a genuine truck driver and a genuine doctor were persuaded to act out narrative scenes for me in front of the camera.

Whatever reading strategy the viewer chose, however, there was a clear message that the film was highly constructed. The manipulation by this film is more clearly inscribed in the frame than in Daughter Rite. In my experience, audiences do not feel betrayed by What You Take for Granted... to the extent that they do with Daughter Rite. The conscious way in which they engage in figuring out the aesthetic puzzle of the film allows them to feel more active as viewers and thus less manipulated. When the trick of the film's construction is revealed they usually just laugh at themselves for missing the answer to the puzzle.

With What You Take for Granted... identification is spread among a greater number of characters who, themselves, are quite diversified in terms of age, class, race, and sexual orientation. The range of job experiences they describe are quite broad, too, both in the actual work performed and the emotional tone of the experience. This allows for dispersed identification, de-intensifying the viewing experience. Furthermore, the emotional stakes for the viewer of this film are not as high as in Daughter Rite; What You Take for Granted... is almost sociological in its approach. This makes for a more emotionally cool film which mediates against such deep feelings of betrayal as those experienced by viewers of Daughter Rite.

What You Take For Granted... is an ethical success. Yet that success is bought with a much subdued emotional tone. For an autobiography work, this is a high price to pay. As an artist I'm concerned with the personal and the social, the emotional and the analytical. My current autobiographical film work is exclusively fiction and clearly coded as such. This resolves my ethical responsibilities toward both my subjects and my audience. However, there are many reasons that fiction compels me beyond ethical considerations. But that is a subject for another place.

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- ¹. I am borrowing the phrase "ethics of responsibility" from Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 1991) and bending it to fit my own argument here. Ideas for this chapter were developed in nascent form in, "The Unreliable Aesthetic," presented at the Documentary Fictions Conference, Luxembourg, 1993.
 - ². Nichols, 44-68.
 - ³. John Stuart Katz and Judith Milstein Katz, "Ethics and the Perception of Ethics in Autobiographical Film, in *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photography, Film and TV*, ed. Larry Gross, John Stuart Katz, and Jay Ruby, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 128.
 - ⁴. Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 25-26.
 - ⁵. Mandy Farber, Video Data Bank, private communication.
 - ⁶. J. Hoberman, *Village Voice*, September 9, 1986, 52.
 - ⁷. This point is persuasively made by Laura Kipnis in, "Female Transgression," in *Resolutions: Essays on Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 333-345.
 - ⁸. The American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd edition, 1992.
 - ⁹. One only needs to look at the recent history of the NEA and its defunding of individual artistic works for examples.

¹⁰. Much has been written about the responsibilities of the filmmaker in relation to the subject: the nature of consent; the participants' often competing needs; and the implications of technical choices, such as focal length of lens and composition, in carrying meaning. See Gross, Katz, & Ruby, as well as Nichols, for extended discussions of these issues.

¹¹. See Nichols as well as Gross, Katz, and Ruby.

¹². A random sampling of just a few of the autobiographical films (and tapes) available through the Women Make Movies catalog include: *She's Just Growing Up, Dear*, Julia Tell's film about childhood incest; *Trick or Drink*, Vanalyne Green's tape about growing up with alcoholic parents; Su Friedrich's *The Ties That Bind* and *Sink or Swim*, respectively, about her relationship with her mother and with her father; and Deborah Hoffmann's *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, about her mother's descent into Alzheimer's Disease.

¹³. Lionnet, 92.

¹⁴. Ibid., 193.

¹⁵. Adrienne Rich writes, "poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don't know you know." "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 40.

¹⁶. Ibid., 13.

¹⁷. For an extended discussion of the ethical space in documentary film see Nichols, pp. 76-89. See also, Vivian Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary, *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, vol. 9, no. 4 (1984).

¹⁸. Current estimates are, that in the US, one in four women have been raped. Diana Russell, *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Sexual Abuse, and Sexual Harassment* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1984), cited in Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - from domestic abuse to political terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 30.

¹⁹. This is particularly important in documentary or news footage, for example, the outcry over Janet Cooke faking her Washington Post story about a young boy on drugs for which she won, and later lost, the Pulitzer Prize or, NBC *Dateline* faking an explosive crash of a GM truck for which the network's news director as well as three producers were fired.

²⁰. For example, Warren Beatty's film *Reds*.