

## Blurred Boundaries: Remediation of Found Footage in Experimental Autobiographical Documentary Filmmaking

### Abstract

In this article I argue that using past films as found footage has benefited the documentary filmmaker in the production of experimental films. The use of found footage may be easily replicated using digital technology and re-edited into new work and offers new opportunities to expand filmic discourse beyond the single text; the continuing expansion of screens, formats and new digital technologies affords opportunities for experimentation with diverse screens and screening spaces. Using past films as found footage may also circumvent difficulties in obtaining funding to produce new films or in the purchase of archive material. To amplify my discussion I carry out qualitative analyses of my own film, *My Private Life II* (2015) and Chantal Akerman's found footage films which resonate with my own practice on auto-ethnography and exploration of memory and contested identity.

With the growth of digital technologies and the ease of replication of images, as well as new possibilities of screening work in diverse spaces and screens, the use of past films as found footage has benefited my own practice and the practice of other documentary filmmakers. The found footage films which I explore in this article are conceived as experimental films. I focus on experimental films because, as Landy argues, it “bypass[es] the demands for veracity, evidence, and argument” (Landy 2001, 58). The demand for ‘evidence’ is generally found in the realist conventions of documentary filmmaking whose aim is primarily to provide authentication of the representation of historical events. Experimental films, on the other hand, most often question the notion of evidence or authenticity, avoiding perceived constraints of certainty and reliability. The cinematic strategies deployed in experimental documentary films are varied and this offers a flexibility that may open a window onto distinctive and original ways of mediating historical events. Experimental documentary films do not generally intend to provide the last word on a particular subject but make a contribution to its exploration. Experimental films are usually not immediately popular because they are often considered difficult to ‘read’ in their use of unconventional

strategies. Their breakthroughs however, in terms of uniqueness of technique and form, are often “incorporated into the vocabulary of the mainstream film” (Landy 2001, 59).

There has generally been a historical reluctance by broadcast television, cinemas and film festivals to fund or screen experimental films, often because their rigid organisational structures are dictated by economic concerns and the corresponding necessity to generate large audiences. Experimental films are generally of differing lengths which don't fit into the time 'slots' of television or cinemas; and they often contain oppositional discourse, politically and culturally. Due to these constraints by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century low budget experimental filmmaking became almost invisible. This began to change with the development of low cost video cameras and editing programmes and internet portals such as YouTube and Vimeo. An image can now be reproduced, multiplied or copied or altered with ease. Some of these changes have been liberating for documentary practitioners experimenting with formats, narrative structures and filmic strategies. We may also now look back as well as forward: to analogue film, and digital video; to 'mashups'; to 3D and immersive spaces; to re-filming and the use of our own earlier films as found footage to create new meaning. We may choose to screen our work in a gallery, or projected on a screen or multiple screens in a library, a shop, the subway, or the side of a building; we can use social media to send our films to computers and mobile phones across the globe. The delineated boundaries of a practice specifically created for the black box, the white cube, the mobile phone and the laptop are becoming increasingly blurred. The fluid boundaries of spaces to show work in increasingly innovative and diverse ways therefore allows the possibility of engagement with new audiences to achieve cultural and politically charged engagement by documentary filmmakers whose practice is kept alive by networks of committed organizations and individuals. For documentary filmmakers the use of past films as found footage, which is easily replicated using digital technology and re-edited into new work, circumvents the need for funding to create new films or to access archive material.

With the expansion of formats, viewing spaces and alternative funding I have shifted my own practice away from the mainstream film industry and broadcast television. In my experiments in documentary film practice I work outside the mainstream film industry, obtaining small research grants to fund my work. My aim is to involve the spectator in a

film's discourse to create the space for reflection as well as provide sensation. I may no longer subscribe to the notion that documentary film practice must 'record' or provide 'evidence' in order to justify an argument or to uncover a 'truth'. This allows me to contemplate the meaning of representation, authorial creation and spectatorial engagement in the mediation of memory, place and subjectivities.<sup>i</sup> To this end I explore the opportunities and limitations in the use of hybrid filmic strategies, including realism; performative enactments; voice-overs; the re-filming of analogue footage; the use of different formats; and the reworking of my own films as found footage. In experimental documentary films performative strategies offer the freedom to call upon the imagined, to evoke and to engage with subjectivities to enrich and expand the spectatorial effects of realism. As Arthur Little argues: "The performative documentary is a very robust means by which the filmmaker may deliver a hybridization of documentary modes in a clearly fabricated way that may retain referentiality. These modes work together to *suggest* and not *argue* a message by drawing a conclusion *from* the viewer – not *for* the viewer" (Little, 2007, 25).<sup>ii</sup>

### **Mediating the 'I'**

As an established independent filmmaker I am used to delving into my own experience of the world – drawing on memories and feelings as well as thoughts – to inform my films. As Annette Kuhn observes "...a part of me also 'knows' that my experience - my memories, my feelings - are important because these things make me what I am, make me different from everyone else" (Kuhn, 2002, 33). In my films I may use archive material and still images of the past in order to provide evidence, but I also deploy a range of allegorical and metaphorical cinematic techniques to engage with subjectivities, since the designation of these in audio-visual language is never entirely fixed or determined. They remain open to interpretation and offer a poetic evocation of the past and engagement with subjectivities that is useful in expanding the discourse of experimental documentary films. As Catherine Russell notes "the allegorical discourse [...] marks the point of a vanishing and transitory subjectivity that is at once similar and different, remembered and imagined" (Russell, 1999, 5). Delving into autobiography in order to mediate memory involves a process, an excavation, a digging deeper which lends itself to experimentation, the poetic and the uncertain. It brings one a step closer to an acknowledgement that subjectivity and self-

reflexivity may provide rich possibilities for the cultural exploration of the social world. Alisa Lebow argues that first person filmmaking always carries with it a challenge to the notion of the possibility of a unified subject (Lebow, 2012, 5). She observes that where the filmmaker is both the subject and the object of the gaze she is necessarily divided but it is that very division which “makes first person filmmaking so complex, co-implicated and, indeed, so compelling” (Lebow, 2012, 5).<sup>iii</sup> In *My Private Life* (2014), a 63-minute filmic exploration of subjectivities within my dysfunctional Jewish family my aim was to excavate a buried past, to bring to the surface uncomfortable secrets around my father’s unacknowledged sexuality. The film tells the story of my parents’ early lives, their marriage and divorce, my mother’s remarriage and violence at the hands of my stepfather and my parents’ decision to live together again. In *My Private Life* I adopted an auto-ethnographic approach which Catherine Russell describes as “a form of ‘self fashioning’ where the ethnographer comes to represent themselves within the film as a fiction, inscribing a doubleness within the ethnographic text” (Russell, 2009, 277).



Figure 1: *My Private Life* (2014)



Figure 2: *My Private Life* (2014)

Russell points out that in this approach “a common feature is the first person voice-over that is intensely and unambiguously subjective” (ibid). The extensive voice-overs describe memories of the past and mingle, not in conversation since my parents talk in the past tense and my own voice is generally in the present tense and often addresses them directly from a non-diegetic space in my role as filmmaker as I search their narratives for clues that would reorder their fixed narratives. The inclusion of my embodied self in the film as the ‘daughter’, for example when I address the camera about my father’s failure to express love for me or my mother, may serve to remind spectators that my ‘real’ authorial self may also convey a fabricated point of view, a mask that both disguises and reveals (Sayad, 2013, 4). My created multiple selves do not serve to provide an authentic mediation of familial relationships but uncertainty; a dispersion of meaning that may allow the spectator to speculate on what has been seen and heard. The multiplicity of ‘voices’ moving through different tenses, questioning what is seen and heard allows the film to offer itself to differing spectatorial interpretations of my own contested identity and that of my parents. I deployed hybrid strategies to create a layered fragmented narrative in three sections on a single screen to explore and re-mediate material focused on the characters’ different memories of the same events in the past.

### **Using Past Films As Found Footage**

In 2015 I made *My Private Life II*, a 25-minute, split-screen version film which I constructed through the re-editing and reformatting of footage from *My Private Life*. My aim was to reflect on the different possibilities of format and editing choices; to expand the idea of uncertainty and lack of closure since the text may always continue in new forms. At the heart of this methodology is the use of repetition, of images, gesture and sound to allow a reconsideration of the film’s discourse. My aim was to transform realism into poetic evocation while the repetition of footage and reframing of the narrative structure allows for a new reading of the original text. I created fragmentation, not through the narrative but through repetition of images and split screens in order to create an additional reference point and potential re-assessment of the original mediation in the spectator’s imagination. In reworking a past film as found footage in order to experiment and bypass problems of access to funding I drew on the example of American and European avant-garde film movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Eli Horwatt: “A central practice of the North

American and European avant-garde film movements, found footage filmmaking refers to the practice of appropriating pre-existing film footage in order to denature, detourn or recontextualize images by inscribing new meanings onto materials through creative montage” (Horwatt, 2009, 1). In using my past film as found footage I drew upon the approach of the Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman in her re-evaluation of her work. Her extensive body of work blurs boundaries between genres in a transformation of footage from her earlier works – many of them fiction films – into autobiographical documentaries which explore memory and contested identity. Many of her films contain repetitions of actions and gestures that allow the spectator to ruminate and to reassess. According to Giorgio Agamben “Repetition is not the return of the identical; it is not the same as such that returns. The force and the grace of repetition, the novelty it brings us, is the return as the possibility of what was” (Agamben, 2002).

### **Split Screens and Multiple Screens**

In *My Private Life II* footage from the earlier film was reworked using a highly constructed sound-track and manipulation of the image to make memory-scapes. Characters are defined by the boundaries of the three split screens, creating a sensation of a fracturing of familial memories and subjectivities. My stepfather’s violence is evoked through the sounds of off-screen shouting and the smashing of glass, edited over a black frame in the centre of the triptych and photographs of my stepfather appear in the enclosing screens. A door slowly opens in the central screen and shuts. Ruptures in the diegesis punctuate the rhythmic visual patterns of shots and frames; and frames, often cutting to black, evoke the three central characters’ inability to cross emotional and physical divides. Images of photographs, home movies, a small girl on a swing and the houses I grew up in are intercut with images of the construction of a scale model of a family house. The extraction and rearranging of images in the split screen version of the film rearranges its process of signification. As the images unfold on the split screens a memory of images or sounds from the earlier version may appear in the spectator’s memory in fragments or pieces and these will impact and inform each other while viewing the new film. The signified becomes less fixed and the overall effect and meaning cannot be predicted. The different possibilities of spectatorial interpretations and lack of narrative resolution are reinforced by the use of split screens.

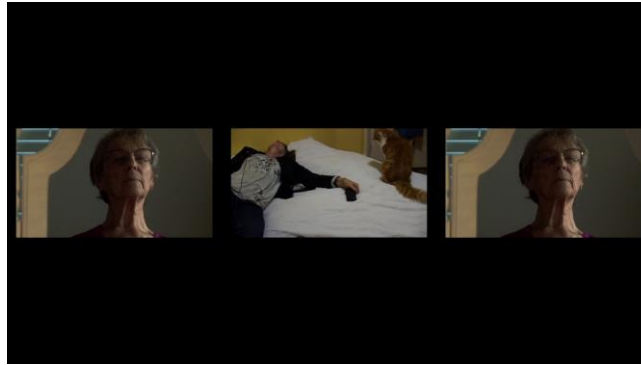


Figure 3: *My Private Life II* (2015)

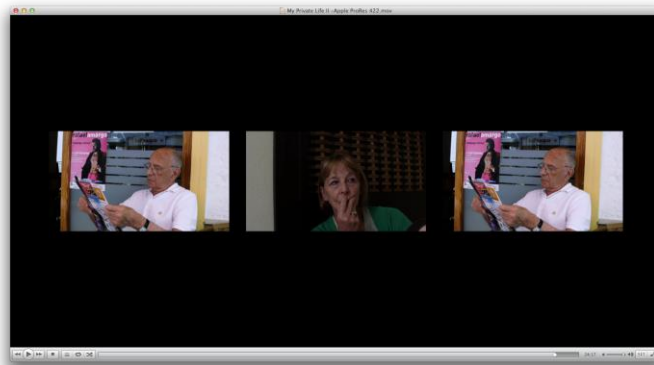


Figure 4: Screenshot *My Private Life II* (2015)

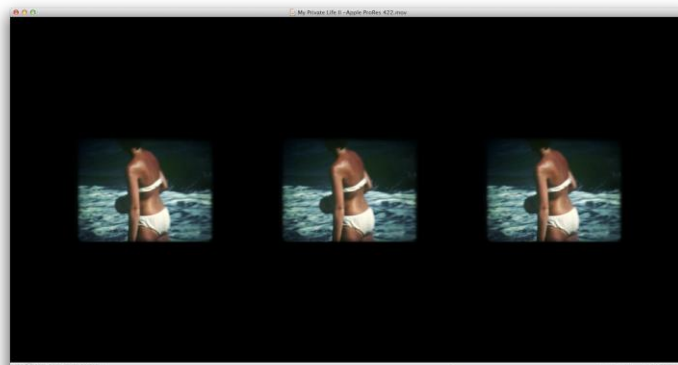


Figure 5: Screenshot: *My Private Life II* (2015)

The images appear and disappear in one or more frames, often punctuated by black; at times this creates strongly abstract patterns whose visual impact offer little reference to the narrative. At other times, for example in the wide shots of orchids and the empty bedroom, the images, identical in all three frames evoke a powerful sensation of loss after the death of my mother. Addressing the camera and spectator directly from the central frame positions me in my dual role as filmmaker and daughter, and the repeated images of different houses, poetic enactments, home movie footage and unidentified hands

constructing the model of a terraced house, deepens the sensation of temporal and spatial dislocation. The overall impact is a powerful and poetic evocation of memory and contested identities.

### **Installation and the Gallery**

In a further iteration, not yet created, *My Private Life III* will be an immersive installation piece located in an empty shop in a city high street. The film will be shown at timed intervals allowing space for audience discussion after each screening. Each of the three frames in *My Private Life II* will be projected on to three individual screens, placed to form a semi-circle around the 'set' to create the domestic space of a living room. Spectators will be invited to wander around the 'set', to sit in an armchair or on a hard stool, to become 'participants' in the film; they will be able to carry out tasks such as knitting, reading a newspaper or drinking tea, mirroring the actions performed by the characters in the film. This will provide another, more participatory viewing experience to the other two films in the trilogy and a re-assessment of the original.

The idea of the spectator as 'wanderer' liberated from the frontality of the viewing position in the cinema was pioneered by the work of Akerman. She was one of the first filmmakers to work within the gallery space, constructing installations specifically for galleries and museums from the mid-1990s while continuing to make feature films for theatrical distribution. In 2001 she constructed *Woman Sitting After a Killing*, a multiple-screen installation piece which reflects on her filmmaking process in her much earlier fiction film, *Jeanne Dielman 23 Quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). It was this film that brought Akerman to the attention of an international art-house audience. It is 200 minutes long and gives an account of three days in the life of a Belgian middle-class woman, Jeanne Dielman. Shot in a series of long takes the film documents the ritualistic minutiae of her daily life; cooking for her teenage son, shopping and cleaning her apartment and in the afternoons having discreet paid sex with different men. Towards the end of the film after she appears to experience pleasure during sex with a client (the only time the camera enters the bedroom to reveal the sex), she kills him with a pair of scissors. The installation in the gallery shows the last 10 minutes of the original film, shot in a single long take where Dielman sits after the murder at her dinner table. She is almost immobile. The image is shown on seven



separate monitors. Each version begins after an interval of time so the images shown are not identical. The repetition of this shot and the absence of narrative allows the spectator to imagine their own narrative and character motivation, and perhaps to frame it in a memory of the original film. The spectator may move from monitor to monitor to spend time with the image, to participate in the construction of meaning and to give consideration to Akerman's decisions in the construction of these interlinked works. The movement of the spectator as a wanderer creates the movement of the installation. Akerman dismantled and rebuilt many of her films by bringing them into the gallery and adapting them according to the specifics of a space. This provided Akerman with further repetition of her material in a reassessment of the original. Gwendolyn Foster notes that "Akerman's cinematic style is uniquely suited to the demands of a museum installation as a space made for wandering" (Foster, 1999, 7).

Many of Akerman's installation pieces reflect on, or echo themes that may be found in her earlier films. Themes are repeated and reworked. In *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman "D'Est"* (1995) for example, Akerman reworked footage from her earlier film *From the East/D'Est* (1993), which was shot in several eastern European countries just after the disintegration of communism. The gallery version comprises three rooms, the first shows the film in its entirety; the second and third rooms contain a multiple screen installation showed scenes of everyday and public life where spatial concerns become more prominent than narrative. The gallery installation of *In the Mirror* (2007) contains footage from one of Akerman's earliest short films *L'Enfant Aimee* (1971). In the installation, a large screen propped against a wall shows a young woman contemplating and assessing the qualities of her body, her image reflected in a full length wardrobe mirror. The performative quality of the young woman's gestures and murmurs is intensified by the spectatorial relationship to the screen. The spectator may come close to the screen and see the piece repeated, or leave before the end, a very different viewing experience to the fixed frontal viewing position in the cinema.

In a later work *Maniac Shadows* (2013) Akerman continued her autobiographical contemplation by constructing a three-screen installation showing intimate almost silent scenes from her own life inside an apartment we assume to be hers, juxtaposed with noisy

uptown street scenes in New York and fuzzy scenes of Obama's election night party. While the installation is not the same as the images in the screens in *My Private Life II* where the images generally have direct implied relationships with each other through the narrative, the images in the different screens in *Maniac Shadows* have no obvious narrative relationship. However, by projecting them side by side the spectator may also make relationships of interior and exterior space and speculate on Akerman's exclusion and distance from the public world. By reworking past films to offer new meanings and taking them into the physical space of the gallery and using screens as physical objects for the spectator to wander around and participate in, my work and Akerman's expands the filmic discourse of our earlier works enabling the text to break the boundary of closure.

The expansion of small, independent viewing spaces, galleries, diverse screens and new digital formats is bringing new opportunities to the experimental documentary filmmaker. The ability to reproduce digital images with ease has led to a different relationship between the spectator and the image. Films can be shown in galleries or other locations where the spectator may become a wanderer and an active participant in the work. Documentary filmmakers may rework their past films with ease to experiment with stylistic forms to create new meanings and a range of viewing experiences; to evoke uncertainty not closure. They are shown in new venues and spaces and on diverse screens. This is deepening spectatorial participation rather than identification in the reading of images and allows the possibility of new mediations, new aesthetic possibilities and new rhetoric.

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<sup>i</sup> See *Not Reconciled*, 2009 and *The Border Crossing*, 2011, created for my practice-led PhD *Memory, Place and Subjectivities: Experiments in Independent Documentary Filmmaking*, 2014. Available at: [http://www.academia.edu/22214782/Memory\\_Place\\_and\\_Subjectivity\\_Experiments\\_in\\_Independent\\_Documentary\\_Filmmaking](http://www.academia.edu/22214782/Memory_Place_and_Subjectivity_Experiments_in_Independent_Documentary_Filmmaking)

<sup>ii</sup> Notable examples are Ngozi Onwurah's *The Body Beautiful*, 1990; Marlon Riggs *Tongues Untied*, 1989; Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*, 1929.

<sup>iii</sup> See for example, Carol Morley's *The Alcohol Years*, 2000; Sarah Polley's *The Stories We Tell*, 2012; Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige*, 1991.