

DEAR CAMERA ..

Video Diaries, Subjectivity and Media Power

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I have spent the last twenty-five years working in the different, and often antagonistic, worlds of 'alternative media' and television production. I start by saying this both because the 'Girls, Girls, Girls' video-diary series for Channel 4 I am going on to discuss later in this paper was itself the product of a meeting of those two worlds, and because it may help to explain some of the underlying concerns in my writing here. My focus is on production techniques, and my theme is a tentative¹ exploration of the potential significance of the Video Diary as a 'genre' for 'alternative media' practice, looking in particular at the power of the autobiographical address to the camera.

It has always been a belief central to my work that, in Nick Couldry's words, *"symbolic power" .. is concentrated in one sector of society, not evenly distributed* (Couldry, 2001). Much of my work as an 'alternative media' worker, along with many others, has been to challenge this inequality, to find ways of gaining access to TV for and with those traditionally excluded from

¹ I say tentative because mine is a very partial account in at least two ways: the examples of the genre I look at are from a short series for Channel 4 I was creatively involved in myself, as producer, and I discuss only a few minutes out of this series, also ignoring all of the substantial Video Diary and Video Nation work produced by the BBC's Community Programme Unit (of which more later).

the centres of media power. As a filmmaker and TV producer I have had an additional interest. Since my first exposure to professional production processes at film school in the early '70s I have felt that television was a very impoverished and under-developed medium, ruled by rigid and stale codes. I have always thought that the processes of inclusion and exclusion from media power themselves resulted in stultified and boring programmes, and televisual forms being in some way moulded and deadened by this inequality. 'Access' for me has always been an aesthetic as well as a political issue, about representation in both senses of my understanding of the word. The first describes the more obviously political process in which certain groups of people, certain interests, certain points of view are included or excluded, skewing the content of mainstream TV. The second refers to the forms of television itself, the ways in which the world is being re-presented, and the televisual languages that are being deployed to do so.

So for me, 'access' is not just about who gets on TV, but on what terms, under whose editorial control, and crucially for this paper, using which programme-making forms, which particular discursive strategies? I have always had an intuitive sense that people traditionally excluded from the media sphere, if they had the opportunity to make TV on their own terms, would evolve their own communicative styles, their own televisual languages, that might both subvert and enrich the mainstream.

Video diaries are a useful genre to look at in this regard because they offer instances in which people are enabled to work very much 'on their own

terms' in the production process. The Video Diary genre was developed by the BBC's Community Programme Unit in the UK, and came about as a response by broadcasters interested in 'access TV' (non-professionals making TV programmes), to the proliferation of Hi8, then DV, camcorders in the 1990s. Although cheap, portable, user-friendly video cameras and recorders had been available for the previous twenty years, the coming of Hi8 was the first time that the image quality they offered passed the minimum quality threshold of the Broadcast TV engineers, and an industry keen to cut production costs quickly adopted the camcorder in a wide range of factual programming. However it would be a mistake to see its adoption only in economic or technological terms. In the context of UK television certainly it both reflected and deepened an ongoing 'post-modern' crisis of documentary authority, as Jon Dovey comments:

'Whilst the globalisation and centralisation of media power has continued apace it has been accompanied by a seemingly contradictory fragmentation of cultures and political systems. The fragmentation has been reflected by the proliferation of subjective media forms such as camcorder video, which have served to undermine the citadel of objective realism...

So the sudden infusion of camcorder truth into the mass media domain reflects wider cultural developments. Subjectivity, the personal, the intimate, as the only remaining response to a chaotic, senseless, out of control world in which the kind of objectivity demanded by the grand narratives is no longer possible.'

(Dovey, 1996: 130)

The progressive deployment of subjectivity in opposition to 'grand narratives' has also been a theme in some recent writing about avant-garde autobiographical film and video. In an article about the work of Jonas Mekas and others, Michael Renov writes:

'If we can say that history belongs to those with the power to re-present it, little wonder that film and video practitioners have come to share the revisionist historians' suspicion for top-down institutional accounts. Instead a number of contemporary artists seem to have gravitated toward an approach in which a past, frequently public event is figured through recourse to the subject, the category of the self ..' (Renov 1989: 5)

And Catherine Russell suggests, in relation to work by George Kuchar and Sadie Benning, how:

'Instead of a transcendental subject of vision, these videos enact the details of a particularized, partialized subjectivity.' (Russell, 1999: 295)

having previously discussed the way in which

'(Sadie) Benning's 'party on the margins' uses collage in conjunction with the diary format to construct a hybrid identity that refuses to be pinned down The notion of hybridity is key to the diary film and video because it

suggests how the multiple effects of voice, vision and body can produce new forms of subjectivity. Through hybridity, post-colonial subjects as well as other identities can potentially escape the limits of nation and gender.' (Russell, 1999: 293)

Renov and Russell suggest how the autobiographical mode in filmmaking offers strategies for subverting the oppressive narratives of objectivity that dominate the mainstream. In what follows I am interested in seeing how, in the 'Girls, Girls, Girls' series, some of the diarists used their '*particularized, partialized subjectivity*' to explore and escape their own personal and social limits, and what formal strategies they used to do so.

How the series came about

'Girls, Girls, Girls' was a by-product of an enormous longitudinal social research project - '4:21' -, the conclusions of which are published this year (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001). The aim of the project was to track the progression of a group of girls from childhood, through adolescence to young adulthood. Around 40 girls were chosen and most of them followed consistently from the ages of 4 to 21 (hence the project's title), using a variety of research techniques including in-depth personal interviews and audio-recording. When the girls were in their teens the research team began

experimenting with video², partly inspired by the video diary work that was coming out of the BBC's Community Programme Unit.

In fact the 4:21 team approached the Unit with the idea of working together, and received some training in video diary production techniques from them. In the end they forged a longer term relationship with the Independent Film & Video Department at Channel 4, who gave them funding to buy Hi8 camcorders on the understanding that they could broadcast any programmes might result out of the girls' video diaries made on the camcorders, if and when that happened a few years down the line. In the four years that intervened between the team receiving the equipment and returning to the Channel with the results (which was when I became involved as producer), there had been significant changes in personnel within the Independent Film & Video Department, and in the philosophy of the Channel as a whole. The team's original aspiration was to make a series of one-hour documentaries, based on the video diaries but including other material, that would reflect the breadth and depth of the processes and findings of the 4:21 Project as a whole. It quickly became clear that this approach would not find favour with the new regime at the Channel, in my view for two main reasons: the serious, analytical and issue-based documentary form was increasingly being eclipsed at the time by the ratings grabbing docu-soap, and the concept of 'access TV' was by then completely out of fashion. Both of these approaches to television production were (and still are) stigmatised as 'worthy but dull', and seen as

² An account of the video diary process by members of the team is also being published soon (Pini & Walkerdine, forthcoming)

appropriate only for minority audiences rather than the broader demographic Channel 4 now sought in the increasingly fierce competition for audiences.

With these pressures in mind we set about making a pilot for a series which would attract the Channel's interest. Two young directors - Tracy Bass and Tamara McClachan - trawled through the logs of the 175 hours of diary material the girls had recorded by then, listened to the project team's recommendations, and put together a fast paced, 7 minute edit of 'highlights', intercutting between different girls' material where they could make contrasts or comparisons. The Channel finally commissioned 12 short (3 minute) programmes on the basis of this pilot and some short programme outlines which we wrote, focusing on the 'feisty' dynamism of the girls' material. Tracy and Tamara physically edited down the material into their 3 minute slots but we involved the diarists throughout the editing process. We informed them which bits we thinking of using, showed them to them and got their consent, in some cases worked with them to record extra sequences to make stories work, showed them rough cuts and signed off the final versions with them. Unusually for Channel 4 contracts, ours specified that the diarists had editorial veto. The programmes were transmitted over three weeks in the summer of 1997, in the Slot³, a three minute strand at 7.55pm after the news.

³ The Slot is seen by Channel 4 as an area of risk and experiment, where they can try out new voices and techniques. VHS copies of 'Girls, Girls, Girls' are available from APT Film & Television, 225a Brecknock Road, London N19 5AA e: admin@aptfilms.com

Dear Camera ..

What kinds of formal innovation are in evidence in the 'Girls, Girls, Girls' series? The video diary genre itself is unusual because, despite the precedent of autobiographical film in the avant-garde cited above, it probably owes more to the diary form's literary antecedents than to film or television conventions:

'The visual form ... borrows from the literary model the tone, the revelation of intimate detail, and its use as a site for recording traumatic or at least serious confessions. The personal mode of address has a visual analogue in the 'to-camera' set up of the video diary ..' (Reid 1999)

So 'Dear diary ..' becomes 'Dear camera ..' in perhaps the most widely used formal strategy in the video diary genre - the 'piece-to-camera' delivered by the diarist – which Sue Dinsmore characterises as

'.. providing a space for self-reflection and reconsideration that performs a function very similar to making an entry in a written diary.' (Dinsmore, 1996: 46)

Ironically, though, and despite its literary antecedents, the 'piece to camera' as a visual convention derives more from the most widely used technique for conveying authority and objectivity on broadcast TV. The direct, square-on address to the camera almost always connotes impartiality, neutrality, the delivery of the objective facts. Its epitome in the UK has historically been the BBC newsreader, but it recurs again and again, from studio presenters to

reporters on location. It is only rarely used to evoke the person's individuality or subjectivity. However, as Jon Dovey notes

'.. in the diary format it becomes another way of creating high levels of identification with the filmmaker. Aiming the camera at yourself, using your own body to record your own body, you the diarist, whisper into the lens. It is the visual equivalent of the actor working downstage in soliloquy to the audience. There is here a particular voice that implicates the individual subjectivities of the mass audience in a different way to the general theatrical address. The actor downstage speaks to every member of the audience individually, the conspiratorial nature of the address bonds us more closely to the speaker. Something very similar occurs with the whispered-to-camcorder close-up - in this separation of foreground and background I am given to understand that as an individual viewer I have been chosen for privileged information which the rest of the scene is not party to. I am being brought much closer, intimately closer, to the diarist and his or her particular subjective experience' (Dovey, 2000: 73)

This intimacy is very much in evidence in most of the diaries in the Girls, Girls, Girls series. From the moment she was given her camera when she was 16, Ruth Thorpe was committed to addressing it in a personal and intimate way:

'I started off with lots of pieces to camera .. I loved it. I'd just moved out of home, living by myself and everything, and I just kept putting it on

*all the time .. then rewinding it and watching it back. I thought it was brilliant .. it was a brand new toy.*⁴

And

'I had a lot to say, and it was a bit like companionship as well.'

Ruth's feeling for the camera and the use she wanted to make of it seemed very connected to her awareness of living on her own, and the new found freedom that went with it. She referred to the camera as:

'Something to talk to (laughs) that would never answer back.'

(Tony: 'Like a teenage diary?')

'Yeah, you could write anything or say anything about your feelings or whatever and no one would ever say 'You're not allowed to do that, or you've got to be in by ten' (laughs) .. or any of that really. Whatever you wanted to say or do, wherever you wanted to take it .. it was alright!'

A similar sense of freedom and companionship is present in the sequences that Charmaine Mitchell delivered for the series. In one she is standing alone at her bedroom window, commenting casually on the evening street scene below, in between complaining about how little her job pays, or how racist taxi drivers refuse to pick her and her friends up. On other occasions she personalises the camera, like one morning when she was late for work:

⁴ This, and the subsequent quotations by her, are from an interview with Ruth Thorpe

'Morning! It's 7.45 and I'm not dressed yet .. You're probably coming to work with me, see you in a minute!' The sequence then cuts to later when she has dressed, and she approaches the camera to pack it up:



'.. We're going to work now. Bye!'

There was a sense that for most of the young women in the series, having the camera with them, as confidante, was an empowering experience. Another diarist, Polly Haste, used the to-camera technique to give her power over an authoritative adult in a very explicit and amusing way. Shortly after passing her driving test, she had a minor accident which she was frightened of confessing to her mother because the car had sustained some damage. She sat in the kitchen at home and told her camera the story of how the crash happened, and about her apprehensions about her mother's reaction. When her mother comes home, Polly repositions herself to the side of the frame so that she is in the foreground ('downstage') and her mother is at the back of the frame. To Polly's astonishment her mother seems remarkably un-phased by her news and starts asking her questions about a piano they are thinking of buying. Then she leaves the kitchen and Polly leans further into the frame, and, addressing the camera, whispers:



'Strange ..! Why is she talking about the piano when I've just crashed the car?'

Vicky Lamb was another diarist adept at exploiting the subversive potential of controlling and addressing the camera. At the time of making her diary she worked in a telephone call-centre for a travel organisation, and was often forced to work on the weekends. One Sunday she took her camera into work with her and set it up in front of her desk, keeping it running for most of the morning. She makes use of the fact that her customers can hear but not see her, while the camera does both. She complains that her nose is hurting because she's just had it pierced, how she wants to go home to clean it, but can't because she's stuck at the call-centre. And when her customers get particularly irritating she mouths silently at the camera: 'Stupid cow ..' or 'Fuck off ..'



Vicky tends to her nose stud ..

and (silently) tells a customer to fuck off.

'A true reflection of who I was at the time ..' ⁵

For Ruth, pieces to camera were at the heart of how she conceived of the diary project. She used them as much as a private process of self-exploration as for public consumption, even though she was aware that ultimately they were for an audience:

'Mainly I was just doing it for myself .. but I was always aware of the fact that it was going to be watched .. not by the public, I'm not saying I was expecting a million viewers a day or anything .. but I always knew that somebody at some point was going to watch, and I just wanted it to be about me and my life really .. but as true as possible.'

However, she sometimes felt that this desire for authenticity was compromised by Channel 4's involvement in the project:

⁵ Ruth Thorpe's view of her video diaries in her interview with the author.

'At first I was conscious of it, and the other times I was conscious of it was when I would be out with it and everyone, like my friends, would go 'Ooh this is for C4!' or 'Don't use this on TV', or we'd walk into somewhere and they'd all go 'Get your camera out, because we all want to be on TV ..', and I just didn't want that at all.'

Doing pieces-to-camera became her favourite way of working because she felt she could guarantee authenticity using that technique, in contrast to when she was using the camera in company:

'The thing that I didn't like about it was when you'd get it out and everybody would start acting, and I'd just think, 'Oh no, I'm going to put it away if you're going to be like that', because I wanted it all to be real.'

Her committed pursuit of this 'reality' meant that she took pride in recording herself spontaneously, without forethought or worrying about her appearance. She would turn the camera on

'.. first thing in the morning, no make up or hair's not done or whatever .. and I didn't really care. If I thought there was something I wanted to do with it I'd just do it.'

In the way that she lived with the camera, she also made sure that she could respond as spontaneously to herself as she would have been able to with a pen and a diary:

'I'd always have it like, close to hand, half set up anyway, batteries charged, and I knew where everything was ..'

And once she had started, she would allow herself to slip into her own stream of consciousness:

'.. it could go on and on and on and I'd just be babbling away and I'd just be thinking 'why am I doing this?' .. and then I could switch it off and then I'd think 'Oh I didn't say this' and put it back on and carry on again .. '

After recording their tapes the diarists returned the Hi8 material to the 4:21 project, who copied them on to VHS and returned a copy to the diarist, normally within a couple of weeks. Ruth's self-consciousness would return only at the point she replayed the results of her work back to her self.

'That was .. funny .. really funny. Sometimes I remember watching it back and thinking 'Oh I'm never doing that again' or 'I'm never going to wear that again .. It was useful .. like I'd see what I had to say and how I thought about things, and how I felt about things, because I was literally talking to the camera about everything. '

'Someone had to say it ..'

The ability to talk '*to the camera about everything*' that Ruth developed as a diarist led to her recording what for me was one of the most moving pieces-to-camera in the series. It came from her response, as a young black woman, to her viewing on television of a documentary about the Stephen Lawrence case⁶. Its power results directly from the way it was produced, as spontaneous video diary material.

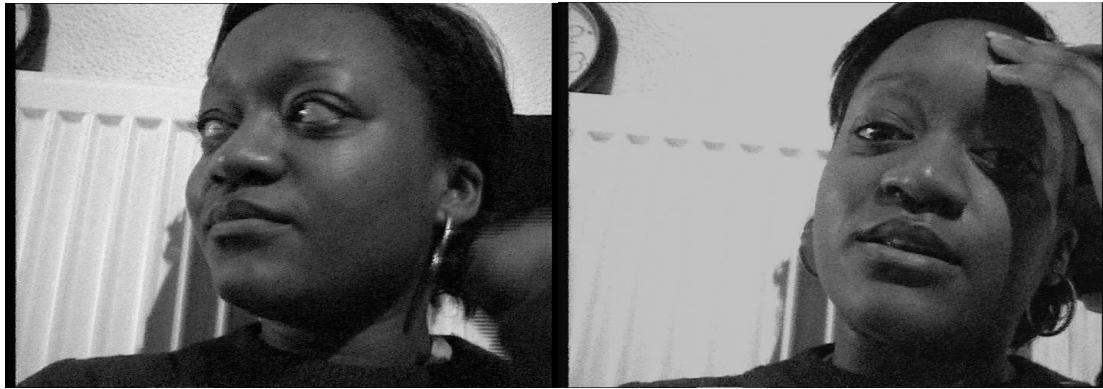
The Lawrence case had not had much impact on Ruth before she saw the documentary:

'There was loads of hype and there was loads of news, and it was in all the papers and all that stuff .. I'd been following it, and I knew a bit about it - not an awful lot - and then everyone was saying that the programme was going to be on, so I sat down to watch it .. I was on my own and as I started to watch it just became really real. When I saw his dad and his dad was crying, it was like, to see a man cry, you know that's a big thing, and it just became that bit more real after watching the programme ..'

Because of her keeping the camera always at the ready, Ruth was prepared:

'I had the camera in my hand, filming the TV - that was towards the end of the programme - for the camera to see what I was seeing, and then after that, my response to what I'd seen ..'

⁶ Stephen Lawrence was a young black man brutally murdered in a racist assault in South London in the early 1990s. His murderers have never been prosecuted and the case caused a public outcry because of the incompetence and apparent indifference of the police.



Ruth looks at the Stephen Lawrence programme .. and gives her reaction

Her monologue lasted for about 14 minutes, which we did our best to cut down to 3 without doing too much violence to the flow of what she was saying. For her, the experience of making it was no different from her other pieces to camera: it was just another spontaneous expression of feeling:

'I wasn't bothered about anything like what I looked like or anything like that. I was just sitting there and talking like I would have talked to my mum or my friends or anybody about it. But I was just having a conversation with the camera about what I thought about what I'd seen ..'

At the same time, I think, the piece exists as a powerful statement about Black British identity and the representation of race in the UK, powerful, maybe, because it subverts some of our expectations about how television texts normally represent these issues. Mark Reid comments how

'The concept of 'representation' ... involves examining the subjects represented in a text in terms of their belonging to particular groups - characterised by gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age; the extent to which

their appearance trades on stereotypical or counter-typical encodings of these groups; and the extent to which these representations serve or counter prominent social values and understandings. In effect, the concept is coloured by the extent to which the subjects are 'representative' of wider social groups, meanings and values.' (Reid 1999)

For Reid one of the 'weaknesses in this approach' is that

'the emphasis on the mediation of meanings is predicated on the existence of a real meaning, a real identity, elsewhere; the idea of individuals as representative (or not) either of groups or of classifications denies those individuals any agency.' (Reid 1999)

The Video Diary genre does the opposite. It affirms the agency of the diarist in the way that it operates as a form:

*"Girls, Girls, Girls," offers a **prima facie** opportunity for challenging 'representation' as a normative interpretative approach. First of all, the young women in the programme filmed themselves, and prior to this, selected themselves for filming. To some extent, they are the authors of their own representation; indeed, the term 'representation' itself becomes partially redundant - these are 'presentations' of self, rather than 're-presentations' of prior existing selves. Thus, these young women are not, for themselves, members of groups, defined by their 'girl-ness', 'black or white-ness', or their*

class membership. They are primarily individuals, rather than representatives.'

(Reid, 1999)

The piece-to-camera is the technique which most enables the diarists to present themselves as individuals with their own agency, and so subvert audience's expectations:

'.. being challenged .. by the face of the author maybe demands that they have a voice, and introduces an ethical dimension to interpretation. The notion of 'representation' is predicated on the subject represented as 'other', and alien, which has the unfortunate effect of silencing them as agents.'

(Reid, 1999)

Ruth's piece about the Lawrence case is intensely personal – a raw expression of heartfelt anger and grief - which is difficult for the viewer not respond to at a similarly raw and emotional level. However, she also comes to some stark conclusions at the end of the piece, which have their own logic because of the power of what has preceded them:

'The state of things in this country is just awful .. There will never be equality for black people in this country .. Never ..'

Looking back, Ruth accounts for her passion and lack of inhibition to her age and her relationship with the camera:

'It was because I just felt comfortable with the camera. And now for me, 8 years later, I would never say that to somebody that I didn't know. Do you know what I mean? I could talk to my mum or someone that I knew very well about it, but I couldn't just come out with all of that and show much emotion and everything now. I'm 24 years old, whereas then it was just like 'I did it, the camera was there, that was how I felt ..'

When the piece was transmitted she received a range of responses from family and friends:

'I got mixed feedback from it. Some people said 'It was really great what you had to say, and someone had to say it ', and stuff like that. And some people said '(Gasp) how could you say that? You went a bit too far' And now I think yeah, I probably did say too much and I said things that could have been damaging to me .. because I work in a school and stuff like that .. I mean it was thoughtless and if I could do it again, then no, I wouldn't have said everything because it was for a public audience .. but for me I wasn't speaking for the camera, I was speaking about how I felt ..'

This was self-expression, not self-representation. It was the unguarded intimacy of the diary format and the piece-to-camera which for me produced the value of the piece, its difference from other more public statements about racism. The fact that it was so personal gives it its political value.

Despite being conscious herself that her piece was an intensely particular and personal response, Ruth did relate her experience of doing it to a perception about media power, about how communities are excluded in mainstream discourse. In the diary piece itself she comments on how at the time there was more coverage on UK television of the OJ Simpson trial in the US than there was on the Lawrence case, and in her interview with me she commented:

'When I think about when other things like that have happened, like in the media.. you get news, you get information, but you don't get a lot of opinion from .. the black community, or from black people, really .. which is my opinion because I'm black. Probably Chinese, Indian, whatever, everybody would probably say the same thing.'

You do get 'a lot of opinion' in the Video Diary genre, opinion from very particular and situated points of view, and this is at the heart of its contribution to subverting and renewing the language of television. As Sue Dinsmore points out, the genre

'.. claims a space in the public airwaves not simply for voices that would otherwise be unheard, but also for a tone of voice that is rarely privileged as part of the public discourse of television.' (Dinsmore, 1996: 55)

The wide variety of ways in which the 'Girls, Girls, Girls' diarists chose to use their cameras – to express this new 'tone of voice' visually - indicate the beginnings of new production strategies – the invention of aesthetic forms in which personal experience can be made publicly relevant and engaging in the personal and domestic context of television consumption.

*'The camcorder records **private** life, which is brought into the **public** domain, for consumption in the **private** world of the living room - creating a closed circuit which begins and ends in domesticity, and depends on the intimacy of the relationship established between diarist and viewer.'* (Dinsmore, 1996: 54)

This intimacy, crucially, is mediated by the diarists' use of the camera. Conventionally in documentary and factual TV, subjects are routinely transformed into objects in the act of being observed by a supposedly 'objective', neutral lens. However in Girls, Girls, Girls the camera is the diarist's friend, close family member, co-conspirator, and it is this relationship which is the basis of the intimacy with the viewer, and a new 'tone of voice' in television.

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