



by Kenneth Dancyger



The autobiographical panelist: from left to right, Gerald O'Grady, Maxi Cohen, Jonas Mekas, John Katz, Jay Ruby, Ed Pincus and Stan Brakhage

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# relaxed, natural and personally transcendent

Artists have always looked within themselves to discover the truths which nourish their art. So is it any wonder that the film artists of the Me Generation have turned to autobiographical film? The size and quality of the movement were measured recently when the Art Gallery of Ontario presented The Conference on Autobiographical Film in November.

"My friend was dying, he was only 30 years old and I made the film for him, to give him immortality. And I made the film for myself. I couldn't handle his dying, wasting away with liver cancer. I had to immerse myself in the ordinary events of everyday life —

banal, undramatic, but normal. It was the only way for me to deal with David's dying. So I made the film *Life and Other Anxieties*."

These words belong to New England filmmaker and teacher Ed Pincus. He was showing his film at a unique event

— The Conference on Autobiographical Film held November 4-5 at Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario. The film and the filmmaker were part of a six week series on autobiographical film, video, photography, and performance, ongoing into December. The program was unusual,

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striking, boring, vivid, stimulating, the whole gamut.

Autobiographical film proved to be so varied that its definition seemed to expand with each film viewed. **Joe and Maxi** (Joe Gold and Maxi Cohen) is a *cinéma vérité* documentary. Sandy Wilson's **Growing Up in Paradise** is a compilation film, **David Holzman's Diary** (Jim McBride) is a dramatic recreation and **Sincerity I, II, III** (Stan Brakhage) are experimental films. And yet they all relate to the filmmaker in a very personal way. Whether they are about their pasts or their present, the films put the filmmaker and his/her sensations in the film's centre.

On the surface, the autobiographical film would seem to be a natural extension of the 70's narcissism – the decade with its excesses, self-indulgence and pretentiousness; and yet the films I saw moved me in quite a different way. There was a timeless quality to the films and a universal quality.

Jay Ruby, one of the panel-participants in the conference, suggested that we shouldn't be surprised that people make films about themselves. After all, autobiography is a legitimate, long-standing literary and artistic form of expression; Bertrand Russell, Thomas Aquinas, Frank Capra wrote self-portraits: Picasso, Van Gogh, virtually every major painter turned to himself as subject. It is believed that Rembrandt may have painted as many as a hundred self-portraits. And yet no one called these men narcissists. (Although the Freudian theory of creativity might refute the present argument.) Ergo autobiography and film. Filmmakers are the latest in a long tradition to use themselves as subjects.

Ed Pincus added an interesting addendum that literary autobiography is the work of artists in their prime; the work of old men and seldom women. Many of the films shown at the Conference were the works of young filmmakers; film autobiography is less predeter-

mined by tradition and consequently, as a form of expression, it knows no bounds of age, sex, or class.

The Conference and series were the brain-child of John S. Katz, Associate Professor of Film at York University who talked about his own interest in Autobiographical film: "I had been teaching documentary film for twelve years. About seven years ago I became interested in new movements within the documentary film – the women's films associated with feminist issues, alternate cinema, revolutionary films, experimental films – and I began to notice that autobiography, the exploration of the self, of one's family, of one's relationships, one's past, one's present, were increasingly the subject matter for these films. Many autobiographical films are neither purely documentary, nor purely experimental; more often they are offshoots of these two film forms. I was attracted to the attempt by these filmmakers to sidestep the artifice of conventional film; to try to use film to get in touch with the self. And I found that my students were responding powerfully to this exploratory form of filmmaking."

Exploratory indeed. Al Maysles brought footage he and his brother had shot of their mother. Straight workprint, unedited. She is not a Rolling Stone, but there is an honesty and charm about her that is as appealing as a strutting Mick Jagger in **Gimme Shelter**. Somehow the Maysles seem to be able to bring out the showman in all their subjects, even their mother. The idea occurs that perhaps there is a showman in all of us.

The filmmaker Maxi Cohen set out to make a film about getting to know her father developed cancer. And died. cancer. She wanted to draw closer to her remaining parent, but didn't know how. She was a filmmaker and so she turned to her medium to try to get closer to this man who was her father and a stranger. In the midst of filming, her father developed cancer. And dies. How terrifying – and yet out of the experience of the filming came a powerful film about children and parents, the difficulty of communication and, most of all, the idea that life ends. The film is quite a humbling experience.

Another type of experience was the David Rimmer film, **West Coast Movie**. Distant, non-judgmental, and yet strangely hypnotic, this work-in-pro-

gress is a visual log of an island community where Rimmer lives. Black and white, colour, blown-up super-8 – just these fragments of what Rimmer hopes to make into a 40 year diary for the island community.

Not all the filmmakers use the form to the same purpose. Stan Brakhage (**Sincerity I, II, III, Duplicity**) uses it to have a recording of past sensations and feelings, a sensory diary. Jonas Mekas (**Notes for Jerome, In Between**) uses the form to organize his life (I'm not sure what that means either). Bill Reid (**Coming Home**) evidently uses it as a form of therapy, an attempt to conciliate and communicate with his family. And some like Martin Scorsese (**Italian American**) use it as a celebration of their roots – he interviews his parents for forty-five minutes and gives us the menu for his mother's spaghetti sauce.

Perhaps the quintessential, autobiographical filmmaker is Miriam Weinstein who presents us with films about her father, her boyfriend and her wedding. The films, aptly titled **My Father the Doctor, Living with Peter, and We Get Married Twice** are very rough technically, are self-consciously trying to reach for feelings, and are ingenuously charming.

As a reporter-participant, I can tell you that there was something the Autobiographical Film Conference captured beautifully. It is difficult to define. The Conference had none of the excitement of the star-studded Festival of Festivals and none of the attendant nervous hype. This Conference was different from an esoteric academic conference on film: to resort to a cliché, it had soul.

The Autobiographical Film Conference had what the proponents of the Human Potential Movement feel is of utmost importance – "real contact" and "human warmth." Students talked to filmmakers over lunch in the A.G.O. cafeteria. Filmmakers talked to filmmakers. Academics talked to other academics. It was all unusual, relaxed, natural. And I think I understand why.

When a filmmaker makes a film about his grandparents or about her father dying, we, in the audience, can't but respond in as personal a way. They expose, they share, and we respond. It's not the type of sharing one experiences when one sees a theatrical film and is excited of titillated. It is a different experience. It is what's fascinating about autobiographical film.