

MEMORY, ETHICS, AND ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DOCUMENTARY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

Emanuela MOTRESCU
ema.motrescu@usm.ro

Faculty of Letters and Communication Sciences
“Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava

Abstract: This article analyses Michelle Citron’s *Daughter Rite* (1979) through the lenses of memory studies, autobiographical narrative theory, and documentary ethics. It examines how the film recontextualizes domestic footage through contradiction and historicization, transforming private family images into subjective and critical reflections on mother-daughter relations. The article also applies Stuart Katz and Judith Milstein Katz’s ethical variables (consent, disclosure, motive, and construction) to assess the moral tensions generated when personal history becomes cinematic material. By combining archival imagery, voice-over narration, and reconstructed scenes, *Daughter Rite* exposes the instability of autobiographical memory and challenges assumptions about documentary objectivity. The analysis demonstrates how Citron’s film foregrounds the constructed nature of self-representation and reveals the ethical complexities inherent in filming intimate relationships. Overall, the article contributes interdisciplinary approaches on autobiographical documentaries and the representation of private life in contemporary non-fiction cinema.

Keywords: *memory construction, documentary ethics, interdisciplinary film studies, autobiographical documentary, archival footage.*

Autobiographical documentaries: theoretical and narrative context

While the modern observational modes of documentary such as Direct Cinema in North America and Cinéma Vérité in France emerged around 1960 due to technological innovations and aesthetic shifts (Winston, 1995), the documentary genre itself originated much earlier. Its roots can be found in the 1920s, when avant-garde experiments and early ethnographic films like those made by Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov shaped the genre (Barnouw, 1993; Nichols, 2017). Therefore, rather than being the beginning of documentary film, the 1960s saw the development of its contemporary expressive forms. For example, Jonas Mekas’s film *Diaries, Notes and Sketches* (1969) depict the rejection of the documentary tradition of direct cinema in favour of a personal style, being

widely regarded as one of the pioneers of diary cinema, his work becoming exponential for autobiographical documentary style.

Beyond the representation of everyday life, the dominant style of autobiographical documentaries merges observational footage with interviews and archival material to create stories. However, the style covers visually abstract representations of objective reality. As Lane observes, autobiographical documentarians “often pursued cinematic forms that metaphorically represents states of mind and emotional states. Filmmakers consistently resisted what would be perceived as realist modes of representation” (Lane, 2002). He also emphasis on the idea that autobiographical documentaries explore American cultural life, offering a renewed artistic perspective on social roles, domestic dynamics, and family relationships. By the mid-1970s, the production of autobiographical documentaries increased significantly, partly due to women filmmakers’ growing need for artistic affirmation and cultural visibility. As generational tensions become increasingly visible, names as Amalie R. Rothschild’s - *Nana, Mom and Me* (1974) Chantal Akerman - *News from Home* – (1977), Joyce Chopra - *Joyce at 34*- (1972) and Michelle Citron - *Daughter Rite* (1979) created films that questioned emotional limits, internal tensions, and the intricacies of female experience, focusing on the mother-daughter bond. K. Beattie emphasizes on the “imaginative singularity which we call our self which is expressed in and through our thoughts and feelings” (Beattie, 2004). Thus, works study individuals' relationships with the social worlds around them, the sense of self emerges as the central abstract dimension under investigation. It addresses to the relationship that we develop with those around us. To clarify the abstract concept of self, we evoke a classification and give a status such as “woman”, “daughter”, “student”, “worker”, that help structure our understanding of who we are. She points to the idea that subjectivity is closely intertwined with identity, and that identity in autobiographical documentaries is shaped by the interplay between individuals and their social environments. According to her definition, "identity, in the singular, can be understood as a fluid multiple condition composed of the sum of various identities which are defined through interaction with others whose identities are similarly changing" (Beattie, 2004). This approach emphasizes on identity as relational, dynamic, and socially constructed. It denies the concept of a stable, unified self, instead portraying identification as a continuous process moulded by changing experiences, cultural settings, and interpersonal relationships.

Another effect that autobiographical documentaries have had inquired consent. The ethics implied in the process were reconsidered

rather than disobeyed. The sensitivity founded in the childhood traumas or fragile family relations made the process of engaging the family members difficult. Engaging family members often proved challenging, as emotional vulnerability and unequal power relations complicated the process of gaining consent. As Nichols (2017) argues, personal documentaries frequently operate within pre-existing social bonds, making ethical negotiation inherently complex. Similar concerns are raised by Aufderheide, Jaszi, and Chandra (2009), who show that projects involving relatives or intimate partners often confront contested boundaries, conflicting expectations, and emotional resistance. For example, Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* (1996) a family portrait constructed through the interaction between the filmmaker and his father, who is openly reluctant to revisit the past or discuss marriage. As Renov (2004) notes in discussions of personal documentary, such works illuminate both the filmmaker's desire for self-understanding and the subject's right to privacy. In the end, it is rather impossible to decide whether the film exceeds moral bounds because Berliner admits both his own perspective and his father's opposition, demonstrating the complex interaction at the heart of autobiographical practice.

In his article “Autobiographical Time,” Jens Brockmeier (2000) argues that the stories people tell about themselves emphasizes on the idea that the stories people tell about themselves in the new literature and documentary film industry have another discursive method and narrative construction. One of his important findings is that autobiographical tales are increasingly emphasizing the intensity or emotional weight of events over rigid chronology, resulting in fragmented, non-linear narrative structures. According to this viewpoint, coherence develops not from temporal order, but from associative relationships, affective linkages, and thematic importance. It seems that the new narrative structure can be now less coherent –follows the intensity of the events rather than the chronology. Time is thus perceived subjectively, designed by personal meanings and emotional resonances. While autobiography is commonly defined as “the story of one's life written by oneself,” Brockmeier builds on this concept by demonstrating how ordering, memory, cognition, emotion, and motivation form the narrative, giving personal experience its interpretive structure. This formula emphasizes that time is not experienced uniformly: rather, it is saturated with personal meanings, emotions, and sensory impressions

Autobiographical narration generates its own time. Rather than following chronological order, autobiographical narratives have their own

internal temporal logic. Events are chosen based on their subjective significance rather than their chronological order. This narrative framework, also known as *sjuzhet*, creates a meaningful temporal structure formed by the narrator's emotional and interpretive goals.

The protagonist becomes the centre of the narrative. In autobiographical films, the protagonist and narrator often portray the same person at different points in time. Turning the camera inward necessitates confronting one's own ideas, feelings, experiences, and psychological struggles—all of which are not directly evident on film. According to Brockmeier, “the narrator must by convention bring the protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the protagonist and narrator eventually fuse and become one person with shared consciousness” (Brockmeier, 2000). These fusion positions the narrating self as both subject and interpreter of the life story.

Autobiographical narrative is not about just reconstructing the self within the time and space frame. It evaluates the self, according to ethical convictions and moral assumptions. So, the narrator is not just telling a story about an event, but he makes assumptions under the aegis of ethic and affective considerations. If we take the Michelle Citron's film *Daughter Rite* (1979) and consider the sequence: “Henry came to my room and raped me... I was sitting in bed with the covers around me, to hide, I don't know why and then my mother came ...she knew, I have no doubt that she knew. I said ‘Mother, Henry came to my room last night and he...’ and she cut me off right there. She just cut me off, she turned around and looked in the mirror and started fixing her hair and telling me what she had for dinner...I just wanted her to come over to me and to put her arms around me and to tell me that I wasn't a bad girl”. This words not only sketches a conflict, but they are proposing two directions: one that reflects the view of the narrator at the time when her mother came into her room and another one that reflects at the time the story is told. Both the conflict and its evaluation are events in the past and here, the subject to temporal change is the evaluation itself.

As a conclusion, two temporal levels are exposed: the younger self going through the experience and the adult self-analyses. Both the incident and its interpretation are from the past, yet the appraisal changes with time, revealing how autobiographical narratives constantly reinterpret memory via shifting emotional and ethical lenses. Brockmeier suggested that time is not necessarily thematized, but narratives usually refer to the issue of time “on a more fundamental plane, life narratives imply far-ranging assumptions of time. These assumptions may take form in a certain vision of the course of

one's life, or direction which a life has taken: be it a specific way in which one's life has taken "in time".

Interdisciplinary perspectives in autobiographical documentaries: memory and ethics

Memory is a cultural and psychological phenomenon that occurs on both individual and social levels. According to Brockmeier (2010), the "physiologies of memory" are constantly shaped, both tacitly and explicitly, to ensure that they are available to others through acts of communication. Memory is thus more than just a private storage of impressions; it is a system arranged in ways that facilitate interpersonal access and sharing. Individuals develop their life stories in reference to others, either directly through discussion or indirectly through internalized audience expectations.

In this sense, the recall of autobiographical experiences serves as a model for memory reconstruction. The act of remembering changes the original experience into a component of one's own identity, or narrative self. As a result, the way we tell the event defines us, rather than the event itself. We will refer to the episodic memory because we mentioned already that the autobiographical self is constructed of narratives.

Annette Kuhn suggests in *The Power of Memory* (2002) that moments of change, anxiety, loss, longing, and accomplishment are when memory enters cultural consciousness. Kuhn develops five viewpoints that shed light on how memory functions and they will be applied in the further section of the present study. Moreover, she emphasizes on to stress that memory is a concept with cultural, social, and personal resonance. This concept interacts with the authenticity issue in autobiographical films since it is challenging to visually depict subjective recollection due to individual differences in perception, emotion, and interpretation. While some memories are fractured or unstable, others seem "frozen" like still photos. Like a living thing, memory shifts, fades, and reappears in response to external stimuli. Because recollection occurs in the present, memory bridges past and present, a point articulated by Jill Daniels, "In the process of memory...the now is as important as the then... Memory is a relationship between pasts and particular presents" (Daniels, 2005). Non-fiction has traditionally been based on objectivity and the idea that pictures should maintain their integrity as "visible evidence," according to Michael Renov (2004). Because autobiographical documentaries defy this expectation, they are frequently seen as problematic in documentary theory. More difficulties arise when autobiographical movies deal with trauma. According to Cathy Caruth (1996), trauma is "a wound inflicted on the mind," an experience that

is not completely understood at the time it happens. Because it is filtered by repression and indirect recollection, traumatic memory is intrinsically untrustworthy. Caruth shows that the processes of traumatic reconstruction inevitably cause historical memory to be warped. Because of these instabilities, filmmakers frequently use formal techniques to highlight how memory and identity are produced, such as asynchronous sound, disjunctive montage, or non-linear editing. These methods draw attention to the difficulty of reaching a “pure” past as well as the creative work required to depict subjective experience on screen.

Ethical variables in autobiographical documentary and practice

The belief that the documentary camera may operate objectively is examined by John Stuart Katz and Judith Milstein Katz (1988) in *Image Ethics*. Their work offers a fundamental framework for comprehending the moral dilemmas that come up during the filmmaking process, and it influences the methodology used in the practical project as well as the film evaluations that are given in the part that follows. The authors point out that when “others respond to our behaviour, interpreting what we mean by what we do and say, and respond not to us directly but to their own interpretations of our actions,” ethical complexity arises (Katz & Katz, 1988).

When a filmmaker focuses the camera on personal experience, ethical issues become very apparent. Relatives, delicate recollections, and personal stories present circumstances where choices must be made based on both creative goals and moral obligations. According to Katz & Katz's theory, meaning is shaped by interpretation rather than explicit intention, and issues like permission, privacy, and representation arise from the interaction between the participant and the filmmaker. A more complex understanding of these difficulties is supported by the viewpoints presented in *Image Ethics*. They offer a framework for assessing how autobiographical movies negotiate the rights of participants while creating narrative meaning. These ideas are used in the analytical part that follows to look at how ethical decisions affect the viewer's perception and the interpretive framework of the chosen film.

The complexity of these three words raises an issue that transcends the limitation of the legal release form. If we consider consent, a view thorough its layers should be considered. The subject not only has to know that is interviewed but also to understand the perspective in which he/she will be placed. It is mandatory to be understood that the footage is edited at some point and in some cases the final content can be changed. The

meaning of what it is said can be easily altered. The most delicate part is to be ensured that what the filmmaker says, or promise is received by the subject as it is. The ethical issue is generated by these gaps in understanding where the filmmaker is deliberately wanders the unclarified intentions. Additionally, the informed voluntary consent standard is changing when the filmmaker is filming his own family and friends.

Besides the consent there is also the disclosure that ethics insist on documentaries. Even if a person gives the consent to participate in the film it does not mean that the filmmaker has all the rights upon privacy. Each individual has a right for privacy, and it means that is a personal right to decide how much, to whom, and when disclosure is revealed. Film makers are usually accused when they obtain the disclosure for the film and the subject, or the audience considers it ‘too personal’. Here comes the risk that the camera can be perceived more as a weapon than an instrument. It is speculated that, a ‘too personal’ disclosure is ‘felt’ when something is too much both as a subject and filmmaker. Signs of discomfort will be transmitted if not verbally, then through non-verbal communication. On the other hand, an ‘overdisclosure’ is accepted in some situations. For example, the journalist film maker has sometimes the role to unmask people in power who are themselves deceivers. It was observed that the documentary audience is sensitive from the moral point of view when the subject is not in control. If he/ she has been pushed to disclosure and they would not allow if they had control, then the filmmaker’s approach is to be questioned. In fact, disclosure and the control of disclosure occurs at both levels (self-control, editorial control). Subjects try to control their emotions and/or the show of emotions or choose to express their feelings openly. When physically able they approach, or avoid, the camera. At the editorial level, the filmmaker chooses to include or exclude such footage. Thus, the viewer might be suspicious about the ethics of the disclosure. The attention might be transferred on how comfortable the subjects are. If they are uncomfortable, it is tried to be determined if the filmmaker and the presence of the camera is the reason of discomfort and whether he/she is sensitive to it. In addition, if there is a doubt whether the participation is voluntary, we are more likely to judge the filmmaker, especially an autobiographical filmmaker. Our standards regarding disclosure do not change for autobiographical films but rather our perception of ‘overdisclosure’ is likely to be contaminated as our perception of intimacy and/or constraint increase. As Katz affirms, when you find “a material ‘too intimate’ it is more likely to err in perceiving discomfort among the filmic subjects. We may perceive (or project) discomfort when none exists.”

The following issue to be analysed from the ethics perspective after, consent and disclosure, is the motive. Another rooted thought from our culture is that you cannot ‘use’ people without a good cause. Politics is one of the fields where this right is unquestionable, it is just obvious. There are some films such as the anthropological or educational ones which are justified through the information that they provide and their role of educational purpose. It does not mean that they break the rule of consent and disclosure, but the motive plays a stronger role. In autobiographical documentaries the justification must be extremely careful formulated. Usually, such film is valued depending on the level of credibility that the justification has. It is said that both audiences and critics question the propriety of “washings one’s dirty linen in public or using film as therapy.” Autobiographical films sometimes fail as films of other genres do. It is said that in the twentieth century, family life is not so much explored. The level of secrecy is high, and we know little about other families: how they interact or how they spend their free time. Most of the times we have prejudices about others life, and we compare ourselves with myths rather than the reality itself. Autobiographical documentaries offer us the privilege of ‘entering’ in one’s home, on an intimate basis, and this may have a humanizing and educative experience. So, it is not about the disclosure that we meet in a film but what is presented. The content of a conflict in an autobiographical documentary is greater questioned than a personal conflict questioned in other documentary films.

In comparison with the traditional filmmakers, the autobiographical ones are exposed by being on camera or integrated in the sound part. They are equally exposed as the subjects are in a sense that they can be also analysed. The attention is concentrated on them more because it is an autobiographical work, and because, as a viewer, you might expect to find a deeper motivation. The transparency that is offered in this genre of documentary is not a characteristic that you find in other films. Image shows us their view of the world whether they mean it or not. No matter how much we may feel the need for an objective witness of reality our image producing technologies will not provide it for us.” Another message that comes along with this point of view is that an image maker has the moral obligation to assume that the images represent a subjective reality. As long as the public receives and accepts a representation of reality, the image maker has the moral obligation to present it far from being objective. In autobiographical documentary the filmmaker’s flow in influencing and directing the story is considerably more visible than in other documentaries. Only a less educated in the film process viewer

would take the story as a pure authentic truth. When assessing ethical responsibility in autobiographical filmmaking, the four variables (consent, disclosure, motive, and construction) are essential. Particularly in partnerships that already exist, consent may not always be entirely freely. This ambiguity might influence how disclosure is viewed, sometimes leading viewers to believe force or manipulation. Cultural background and personal experience further shape how disclosure is interpreted, often directing attention toward the filmmaker's motives and inviting suspicion. As a result, autobiographical filmmakers are frequently judged more severely than other documentarians because their work is rooted in intimate, relational contexts. In terms of construction, these films require creators to expose aspects of their own lives, a process that demands careful consideration from viewers. Ultimately, it must be acknowledged that the filmmaker does not present an objective rendering of reality, and the viewer, in turn, engages with a representation, one shaped by subjective experience, narrative intention, and ethical negotiation.

Film analysis *Daughter's Rite* - Michelle Citron (1979)

The film *Daughter's Rite* by Michelle Citron is an experimental documentary and it explores the relationship between a mother and their adult daughters. It is said that “this classic illustrates the missing link between ‘direct cinema’ documentaries and the later hybrids that acknowledged truth couldn't always be found in front of a camera lens. Scandalous in its day for bending the rules of representation to enlighten its audience.”

The Daughter Rite story is told only from daughter's perspective. We see the mother just in few home movies sequences, but we do not hear her voice. We only hear the daughter's voice as she expresses her feelings and views. The film was described in a variety of ways due to its contentious nature. Regarding the use of the home footage, there are some conflicting criticisms. As you can see, different people have varied opinions about the movie, which led to lengthy debates. The reconstructed home-movie footage in Michelle Citron's film has received a lot of praise for its aesthetic worth; its altered, dreamlike texture successfully reflects the fragmented and emotive nature of memory. Critics contend that the film's subjectivity undermines its seeming consistency.

Home-movie footage and the construction of memory

Drawing on Efrén Cuevas's study (2013), the three conventions he identifies (naturalization, contradiction, and historicization) offer an effective framework for examining Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1979). Thus, we cannot discuss about naturalization in this film. Let's take the example of the sequence where we see the mother with the two sisters coming with a big smile on their face towards the camera. The voice over narrates something which is in total disagreement with what we see. She talks with sadness and disappointment about the mother's decision to move to Hawaii. She imagines how hard and less possible would be to meet her mother. According with the explanation of the naturalization concept, it can be said that Citron's choice of using the footage described above is far from keeping the same value in the original footage as well as in the final documentary. Almost all the home movies in this film are interpreted in an extremely personal way and serves rather for creating an antithesis in the viewer's perception.

From this point of view, almost all the footage is recycled as contradiction. As the example mentioned above, there are more several sequences that works as contradiction. The beginning footage with the sisters and mother being in a boat and waving at the camera, the two little sisters that are unpacking some presents, several shoots with them walking holding their hands and so on, are happy images of the home movies. They acquire different meanings depending on the context in which they are replaced. While describing visually the family within the home movies, there is a connection of the visual narrative with the audio one. This is the moment when the spectator is provoked to interpret the new film. The voice over and interviews with the sisters communicate the traumatic events, which are in contradiction with the emotions transmitted by what we see.

A sequence in which the sisters discover pill bottles in a drawer point to the widespread use of tranquilizers among American women in the mid-20th century. Although Citron does not explicitly frame this scene as social commentary, the footage indirectly evokes broader cultural patterns, allowing the home movie to function as a micro-historical trace.

Theories from social psychology show that autobiographical memory is fundamentally social, since constructing an image of oneself requires real or imagined interaction with others. In *Daughter Rite*, the memories recalled by the protagonist revolve entirely around her relationship with her mother. One example concerns the mother reading her daughter's diary, an intrusion into private space that becomes a defining emotional memory. Citron's montage reinforces this interpretation: the

repeated shots amplify the intensity of the daughter's feelings and transform the recollection into an articulated visual representation. Because memory is abstract and difficult to render on screen, the voice-over remains direct and emphatic, anchoring the images with emotional clarity. The film also conveys memory through interviews, yet the combination of archival footage with narration creates a stronger perceptual effect than spoken description alone. The contrast demonstrates how visualized memory, especially when recontextualized, can shape viewer interpretation more powerfully than simple testimony. Kuhn's five perspectives on memory further illuminate these scenes. Memory shapes inner worlds. Recalling a memory activates unconscious processes, which explains why recollections often evoke thoughts and emotions that exceed rational explanation. Memory actively produces meaning. Autobiographical memories are discursively formed, usually communicated through text, speech, or visual media and shaped by the contexts in which they are expressed. Memory texts have their own formal conventions. Due to their metaphorical nature, memory narratives resemble poetry more than classical linear storytelling. They often appear as fragments, flashes, or montage-like constructions. Memory text voices a collective imagination. Oral histories and personal stories blend cultural, historical, ethical, and poetic elements, interweaving individual and shared realities.

Ethical evaluations through Katz's variables consent, disclosure, motive, construction

The ethical framework outlined by Stuart Katz and Judith Milstein Katz in *Image Ethics* (1988) provides a useful lens through which to examine *Daughter Rite*. Autobiographical documentaries often begin from pre-existing relationships marked by trust and emotional intimacy, yet this closeness also amplifies ethical ambiguity. Applying the four variables (consent, disclosure, motive, and construction) helps clarify how ethical tensions manifest in Citron's film.

Consent is the first variable that seems far from the protagonist's mother. To have the consent means that the characters from film not only know about that they become subjects but also, they agree on this matter. In this film, we see the mother only in the archival footage that is place anyway in a contradiction as I mentioned above. We do not hear a word from what she might have to say. So, we cannot speak about consent. This film influences the viewer to empathize with the protagonist by hating the mother for all the suffer that she produced. But again, this is a pure subjective perspective from which we see this film.

The filmmaker's justification for the project is critical. Citron frames the motive at the start of the film: anxiety surrounding her 28th birthday and its connection to her mother's history becomes the catalyst for the documentary. However, as the narrative unfolds, the mother is repeatedly accused, and the articulation of motive, initially reflective and personal, becomes overshadowed by persistent blame. Because audiences rarely know how other families function, interpretations may rely more on cultural assumptions and myths than on contextual knowledge. This further complicates the ethical evaluation of motive.

As far as construction concerns, autobiographical filmmakers expose themselves through image or voice, making them equally open to interpretation. Citron's protagonist shares her emotions, fears, and vulnerabilities, especially in the sequence describing sexual trauma. Her exposure parallels that of the mother. In this sense, construction becomes a reciprocal ethical space: both subject and filmmaker are rendered analysable. Still, the filmmaker remains responsible for acknowledging that the representation is subjective and for making clear that the film does not claim to provide an objective account of reality. Ethical construction requires transparency about this subjectivity.

This article explored *Daughter's Rite* through the interrelation of cinematic language, autobiographical memory, and ethical representation, aligning with broader questions concerning narrative evolution and meaning making in contemporary cinema. By examining how Michelle Citron reconfigures home-movie footage through contradiction and historicization, the analysis demonstrated how autobiographical films challenge conventional notions of realism and disrupt the stability of personal and familial narratives. Such practices reveal how cinematic storytelling operates as a form of philosophical reflection, interrogating identity, intersubjectivity, and the power of representation. In applying Katz's ethical variables (consent, disclosure, motive, and construction) the study also highlighted the complex moral negotiations involved in transforming private experience into public discourse, demonstrating how emotion, empathy, and vulnerability shape the viewer's engagement. The article therefore establishes a theoretical hypothesis indicating that ethical fragility and memory reconstruction are structurally connected within autobiographical documentaries, influencing both the production of meaning and the viewer's perception. Further research will be conducted to support the theoretical validity of this hypothesis through empirical evidence, including practice-based analysis and audience-centred investigations. Our knowledge of how autobiographical film serves as a rhetorical tool and a

dynamic of individual memory interacts with the more general cultural shifts of modern cinema will be enhanced by such research.

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