

Paul Kerr

Authorship, Autobiography and the Archive: Marilyn on Marilyn, Television and Documentary Theory

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AUTHORSHIP, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE ARCHIVE

MARILYN ON MARILYN, TELEVISION AND DOCUMENTARY THEORY

Paul Kerr
Media Department
Room 145
Grove Building
Middlesex University
The Burroughs
London NW4 4BT
p.kerr@mdx.ac.uk

Abstract: In 2004, documentary theorist Michael Renov described “the recent turn to filmic autobiography” as “the defining trend of ‘post-verite’ documentary practice...” In 2008 Renov went further still, suggesting that “the very idea of autobiography challenges/reinvents the very idea of documentary.” Archive based autobiographical filmmaking, meanwhile, is even more problematic for documentary theory. Indeed, a number of recent documentaries, because of their status somewhere in the spectrum between biography and autobiography, have prompted the construction of an entirely new conceptual category, deploying archival film, often in the form of home movies, to document the lives of their human subjects in Renov’s formulation ‘shared textual authority.’ In this article I examine one of ‘my’ own archive based documentaries, *Marilyn on Marilyn* (BBC2, 2001), as a way of asking questions not just about biographical and autobiographical documentary but also - and perhaps more urgently - about attributions of authorship in archive-based documentary.

Keywords: shared textual authority; found footage; archive; autobiographical filmmaking; first person films; authorship.

1 Introduction

As I drafted this article, in July 2015, archive-based productions seemed to be virtually ubiquitous. In the cinema *Amy* (2015) with its exclusively archive-based image track, had just been released in the UK.

Video 1. *Amy* (Trailer). Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch it.

This, of course, was directed and edited by the team behind *Senna* (Kapadia, 2010) which was made in the same manner, combining existing archive footage with some newly recorded interviews.

Video 2. *Senna* (Trailer). Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch it.

Amy was released only a few months after *Cobain: Montage of Heck* (Morgen, 2015), which was also based on previously unseen home movies and a number of new interviews with friends and family.

Video 3. *Cobain: Montage of Heck* (Trailer). Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch it.

By the time I was finalising revisions for VIEW in October 2015, a new documentary feature, *Listen to Me Marlon* (Riley, 2015), based on audiotapes recorded by the late Marlon Brando, was being released in London cinemas.

Video 4. *Listen to Me Marlon: Official trailer* (2015). Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch it.

Of course, all of these examples are cinematic; what I want to do here is discuss a specific and similarly (auto)biographical television documentary's deployment of archive material. As films as disparate and distinct as these reveal – and others like Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1959) and *Marilyn Times Five* (1968-73) and more recently *Amy* (2015), *Listen to Me Marlon* (2015) and *Cobain: Montage of Heck* (2015) confirm, stars continue to provide a convenient iconic focus or motif for found footage and archival filmmakers. Appropriately enough, then, the film I want to discuss is 'about', but also, I will argue, in some senses 'by' an even more iconic star – the actress Marilyn Monroe. It is entitled *Marilyn on Marilyn* and was first broadcast on BBC2 on 28.12.2001 and subsequently repeated on that channel and on BBC4.

I produced and directed this documentary for the BBC, while working at an independent production company, October Films. Much of my television career had been spent making magazine programmes and documentaries about film and TV for BBC2 and Channel 4 and in 2001 I had produced and directed a BBC2 documentary about the making of *Some Like It Hot*, entitled *Nobody's Perfect* (Kerr, 16.4.01). In the course of our research for this production I had been played a very brief and unrevealing audiotope extract of Marilyn Monroe discussing her part in the film. It had proved unusable in that documentary, but the existence of this and another long reel to reel interview with Monroe, recorded for lengthy profiles in *Life* and *Marie Claire* magazines, gave us the idea for a documentary which she would, posthumously, narrate. This was the seed of what was to become *Marilyn on Marilyn*. I convinced the then Head of Music and Arts to commission this, despite initial reluctance ("not another documentary about Marilyn") by stressing the uniqueness of this proposition – that it would be her telling her own story for the first time in a documentary, rather than being the default assembly of pundits, fans, friends, colleagues and ubiquitous celebrity sound bites with film clips which had characterised such documentaries in the past.

2 Copyright

The documentary has since been repeatedly uploaded to YouTube, not by the current author, although the copyright status of the extracts, stills, audio recordings and music makes further legal distribution prohibitively expensive. Conventionally, British broadcasters clear copyright for a specific and limited number of terrestrial transmissions only and, until the Communications Act of 2003, (which returned post-transmission rights to the production company) there was no incentive for independents to invest in further clearances in order to be able to benefit from the long tail. *Marilyn on Marilyn* and particularly *Billie on Billie* missed out on this development by a matter of months. The documentary is currently available on YouTube.

Video 5. *Marilyn on Marilyn* (BBC2 28.12.2001). A BBC TWO archive based documentary about – and narrated by – Marilyn Monroe. Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch it.

Its critical and ratings success led to the commission of three more film in the same manner – *Bing on Bing* (BBC2 25.12.02), *Mae on Mae*, (BBC2 27.3.2003) and *Billie on Billie* (BBC2 31.3.2003).

3 Documentaries about Marilyn Monroe

Towards the end of her life, Marilyn Monroe allowed two magazine journalists to tape record their interviews with her – Richard Meryman of Life magazine and Georges Belmont of Paris Match. The vocal track of the documentary is based exclusively on those two tape recorded interviews. On the tapes Monroe talks in intimate detail about her childhood, her marriages, what drove her to become an actress, working in Hollywood, and how she felt about being a celebrity and a sex symbol. We negotiated access to these tapes and they provided the basis for this documentary.

Previous documentaries about Marilyn Monroe had been characterized by her absence. After all, she died over fifty years ago, and gave few filmed or broadcast interviews, restricting her appearance in such biographical programmes almost entirely to extracts from her Hollywood films. My proposal to the BBC, as producer/director, was to make a documentary profile of Monroe in which there were no such feature film clips and no other interviewees' voices. Indeed the finished film contains no interviews with the conventional casts of such biographies, neither friends, family, critics nor ex-colleagues. Instead Marilyn's voice is the only one we hear, and she tells her own story on screen for the first time. *Marilyn on Marilyn* also includes previously unseen photographs, outtakes from newsreels, stock footage of Los Angeles during her lifetime and newly discovered home movies of her as a child.

4 The Rebirth of the Author

Archive-based films pose particular problems for documentary theory. When I became an academic in 2007, after more than twenty years working in TV, four of "my" recent documentaries were submitted to the UK's 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. In the event, all four films, including two which were archive-based, 'first person' documentaries, were deemed to be 4* world leading practice as research outputs. That possessive pronoun – "my" documentaries – proved surprising for me, since, having published academic work about film and TV before my two decade sabbatical in Television, I believed that the battle against auteurism had been won long ago. Indeed, I want to argue here that both first person filmmaking and archive-based work raise fundamental questions for documentary authorship – questions I want to address in respect of two of those four submissions, *Marilyn on Marilyn* and *Billie on Billie*. In fact, despite the present writer's validation by the 2008 RAE, it is precisely not such assumed single authorship but the work of the entire team of individual collaborators and institutional contexts and perhaps most significantly the films' posthumous co-authors, which might begin to explain their critical success. Furthermore, archive based films are 'made in the cutting room' even more than is true of all documentaries, and thus authorship might equally be attributed to their editors, in this case Dan Carey and Ollie Huddleston, and their archive researchers, Matt Haan, Louise Smith, and Alastair Siddons.

A flurry of recent publications have added to the complexity of the situation, including *Cinema's Alchemist: the Films of Peter Forgacs* (2011), *The Archive Effect: Found footage and the audiovisual experience of history* (2014) and *Joseph Cornell Versus Cinema* (2015).¹ All three publications privilege cinema (and barely mention television) and assume an unproblematic attribution of authorship. Both of these assumptions about hierarchies between film and television on the one hand and over the production of meaning on the other will be challenged in the course of this article.

The two television documentaries discussed here, which I produced and directed, *Marilyn on Marilyn* and *Billie on Billie*, are both based on archival material and are particularly problematic in auteurist terms. Neither involved filming any new interviews at all and only a few minutes of new footage was shot for and included in either film. Thus the conventional locus of creativity in many auteurist analyses, production itself – rather than pre-production (research and/

¹ Bill Nichols and Michael Renov, *Cinema's Alchemist: The Films of Peter Forgacs*, University of Minnesota Press, 2011; Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found footage and the audiovisual experience of history*, Routledge, 2014; Michael Pigott, *Joseph Cornell Versus Cinema*, Bloomsbury, 2015.

or writing) and post-production (editing, colour grading, dubbing, music, narration etc) – can be virtually omitted from consideration. This perhaps implies that the attribution of authorship is particularly problematic in the archive-based documentary. Bruzzi does discuss the exceptional documentary work of directors Esfir Shub and Emile de Antonio, but they remain exceptions, albeit pioneering ones.²

As indicated above, these two documentaries are by no means unique in being based on first person pre-recorded testimony – other films in this category include but are by no means limited to *The Kid Stays in the Picture* (Morgen and Burstein, 2002).

Video 6. *The Kid Stays in the Picture* (Trailer). Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch it.

Video 7. *My Architect: A Son's Journey*, Trailer (Kahn, 2003). Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch it.

Video 8. *Tupac: Ressurrection*, Trailer (Lazin, 2003). Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch it.

Video 9. *Kurt Cobain: About a Son*, Trailer (Schnack, 2006). Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch it.

These join several more recent productions which have been mentioned already – *Senna*, *Amy* and *Listen to Me Marlon*. Together these films, through what can loosely be characterised as first person, often posthumous, narration, pose particular problems for the attribution of authorship in documentary.

5 Authorship and Narration

The voice-over narration – seen by many scholars as a (if not *the*) locus of authorship, or signature of most expository documentaries is often, in fact, constructed in television in a collaboration between the producer, director, executive producer, commissioning editor and, because of its writing or re-writing during post-production, the editor.

Conventionally, voice-over narration is expository – objective in Bill Nichols' sense of voice-of-God narration – partly to distinguish it from the hierarchy of documentary interviewee voices that are assembled in such documentaries.³ So the attribution of individual authorship is inadequate to the institutional, occupational, generic and technological realities of television production. And if this is the case of all narrated documentaries, how much more complex is that of those whose own subjects' narrated them?

Marilyn on Marilyn avoids expository, voice of God narration, opting instead for half a dozen on screen captions, and raises the question of authorship through its reliance on two pre-recorded sound interviews with the star. Of course this isn't to deny the way in which the two original magazine interviewers guided Monroe's answers, nor the way in which the editorial decisions made by myself and the editor reshaped and selected from that material. Nevertheless, I will argue that recruiting Monroe's voice as the narrator (despite a handful of onscreen captions which remain 'expositional') does privilege it in the telling of her story. *Billie on Billie*, meanwhile, not only deploys pre-recorded sound interviews but also extracts from Holiday's autobiography read by an actress, furthermore, that was itself ghost-written.⁴ These latter extracts were then voiced in post-production by one actress, as was the narration, by another, narration which was itself written in collaboration with the programme's editor, the BBC commissioning editor and the October Films executive producer. I will discuss one way of re-conceptualising the authorship of this kind of archive-based documentary filmmaking later in this article.

2 Stelle Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, Routledge, 2006. pp. 15–36.

3 Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana University Press, 2010

4 This autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956) was co-written with (or more likely ghost-written by) William Duffy. Reprinted by Penguin in 2006.

6 'A Hierarchy of Voices'

The two normative modes with which Nichols characterizes classical or canonical documentary are what he calls the Observational, which is apparently un- or only minimally mediated by a filmmaker's intervention, and the Expository, which Nichols associates with the deployment of an omniscient, voice-of-God commentary. Furthermore it is the expository, which Nichols categorizes as perhaps the default mode of documentary in general and implicitly of television documentary in particular – and it is expository documentary which conventionally relies the most on archive footage – as illustrative material, supporting the commentary. Similarly, the interview has become all but ubiquitous in mainstream documentary. Nichols has diagnosed this as a problem for both documentary theory and practice, because, he argues, the privileging of the interviewee can be at the expense of the diminution of the authorial (directorial and/or narratorial) voice orchestrating the voices of a number of less significant contributors. "The sense of a hierarchy of voices becomes lost."⁵

Recently however Nichols' notion of a hierarchy of voices as the ideal form of documentary has begun to be challenged. In 2004, documentary theorist Michael Renov described what he called 'the recent turn to filmic autobiography' as "the defining trend of 'post-verite' documentary practice..."⁶ Subsequently, Renov went further still, suggesting that "the very idea of autobiography challenges/reinvents the very idea of documentary."⁷ Here the *subject matter* of the film and the *subject making* the film, the matter and the maker, are one and the same. Indeed, a number of recent cinema documentaries, because of their status between biography and autobiography, have prompted the construction of an entirely new conceptual category, deploying archival film, often in the form of home movies, to document the lives of their human subjects. Examples include the footage of the Friedman family in *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), of Jonathan Caouette and his mother in *Tarnation* (2003), of Louis Kahn in *My Architect: A Son's Journey* (2003), Timothy Treadwell in *Grizzly Man* (2005), of Ayrton Senna in *Senna* (2010) and of Amy Winehouse in *Amy* (2015) all of which provide key sequences in their respective films. Nevertheless it is worth stressing here that while the on-screen footage in both *Senna* and *Amy* is exclusively archival there are numerous audio track interviews which were recorded specifically for the respective films. Similarly, whilst both Treadwell and Peereboom were engaged in making films of their own, which were subsequently absorbed into the films we now know directed by Herzog and Forgacs, we can never know what form these films might have eventually taken if they were 'completed' by their originators rather than becoming raw material for later filmmakers.

7 Documentary Theory and Television

I want to pause here for a moment to reprise my critique of the assumption of cinematic specificity in this documentary mode. Much, if not all, of the work on found footage filmmaking of various kinds focuses exclusively on cinema – on the avant garde on the one hand or on theatrical documentary films on the other.⁸ Television is generally omitted from consideration, or alternatively deployed to exemplify the default mode of using archive as merely illustrative in expository documentary. In the recent anthology, *Cinema's Alchemist: The Films of Peter Forgacs*, for instance, the filmography reveals that most of the films were funded by - and largely seen on - television. In the text itself, however, the documentaries are discussed exclusively as if they were films made for and shown in the cinema. Indeed if, as Bruzzi and others suggest, the archival documentary is one of the default subgenres of television non fiction, then auteurism seems to be in the DNA of the production (from pre-production finance to textual tropes of a Michael Moore or Errol Morris) to distribution (from pre-publicity to festival programming) of the cinema documentary.

5 Nichols much reprinted article on the voice in documentary is in Alan Rosenthal and John Corner, eds, *New Challenges for Documentary*, Manchester University Press, 2005, p. 25. The latest edition of Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2010, includes a chapter entitled 'What Gives Documentary Films a Voice of Their Own?', pp. 42–60.

6 Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. xxiii.

7 Michael Renov, 'First person films: some theses on self-inscription' in Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong, eds, *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives and Practices*, Open University Press, 2008, p. 40.

8 For the former see Pigott, cited above, and also William Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films*, Anthology Film Archives, 1993. For the latter see Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films: Compilation Films from propaganda to drama*, George Allen & Unwin, 1964.

8 The Death of the Co-Author

Thomas Austin, discussing *Grizzly Man* (2005), a film attributed to the auteur Werner Herzog, asks what happens to authorship when a documentary re-contextualises footage originally shot by the now dead subject, for their own unrealised documentary purposes, in a subsequent film.⁹ Austin characterises *Grizzly Man* as exhibiting a form of ‘dual’ or ‘double authorship’, a combination of sometimes ‘competing’ voices. Other commentators refer to such films as displaying a documentary ‘polyphony’ in Bakhtin’s terms, a species of video ventriloquism. Strikingly, the trailer for *Grizzly Man* omits the ubiquitous voice-over of the director, Werner Herzog, adding a trailer voice to the voices of Treadwell himself and the on-screen interviewed assembled by Herzog.

Video 10. *Grizzly Man*, Trailer (2005). Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch it.

A different approach to the multi-vocal nature of documentary filmmaking is Lebow’s, citing another of Renov’s formulations, ‘assisted autobiography’ and adding another of her own, ‘posthumous authorship’.¹⁰ In films displaying this trope, ‘the death of the author is no post-structuralist axiom; it is the very condition of the film’s production’.¹¹ Here Lebow is offering a way of conceptualising the death of the ‘assisted autobiographer’, the collaborator whose autobiography is then completed by their ‘assistant’, posthumous colleague and implicit biographer. In the case of *Marilyn on Marilyn* and its sequels this constitutes what Foucault or Barthes might have called the death of the co-author.

Discussing Myerhoff and Littman’s *In her Own Time* (1985), which she describes as by (and about) Myerhoff but co-directed by Littman, Lebow writes that there is no clear author as the credited filmmaker is self-effacing, but the original filmmaker died before authorship was accomplished. For Lebow, such films are ‘made by a ghost on whose reputation the film rides’.¹² But if *In Her Own Time* rides on Myerhoff’s posthumous reputation, how much more does *Marilyn on Marilyn* ride on Monroe’s? The recording of Monroe’s answers to interviewers’ questions provides the narration for the documentary, but it also orchestrates its direction – in tandem, of course, with those interviewers’ questions, the programme’s selection from and arrangement of her answers, and the on screen intertitles which contextualise the chronology of Monroe’s narrative. The (co-) director’s job was thus perhaps to contribute to the arrangement of that orchestration since, unusually, this narration, at least in its unedited form, long pre-existed the making of the documentary.

9 Marilyn on Marilyn and Temporality

It is this temporal disjunction between the speaking (and recording) of the ‘narration’ and its use in the films, which is key here. Jaimie Barron has usefully suggested that it is that very temporal disparity which “often produces not only the archive effect but also what I call the archive affect”, that is to say not just an epistemological effect but also an emotional one.¹³ This “archive affect” creates, for Barron, an ironic distance between the appropriated archival sequence and the documentary context. She is referring here to *The Maelstrom: A Family Chronicle* (1997) but what she says is equally applicable to *Marilyn on Marilyn*. This discrepancy, she suggests,

...produces a sense of irony – of doubled meaning – that causes not laughter but a mournful meditation on what we now know has been lost... [T]he contrast between ‘then’ and ‘now’ provokes a fruitless desire to undo what we know is, for the people in the archival footage, still to come.¹⁴

9 Thomas Austin, ‘To Leave the Confinements of his Humanness: authorial voice, death and constructions of nature in Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man*’ in Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong, eds, *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives and Practices*, Open University Press, 2008, p. 51.

10 Alisa Lebow, *First Person Jewish*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. xxxiii and 151.

11 Alisa Lebow, 2008, p. 153.

12 Alisa Lebow, 2008 p. 155.

13 Jaimie Barron, *The Archive Effect*, 2014, p. 21.

14 Jaimie Barron, 2014, p. 40.

Video 11. Extract from Peter Forgacs's *The Maelstrom – A Family Chronicle* (1997). Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch it.

In *The Maelstrom* the people she refers to are a Jewish family and a Nazi family, as depicted in their home movies. In *Marilyn on Marilyn* this contrast relates not just to the woman in the image track but equally, if not more importantly, to the woman's voice on the audio track – that of the first person narrator, Marilyn herself. As Baron goes on, "Indeed we know that these people we see looking so happy and alive are about to die."¹⁵ If this is true of the visual track of *The Maelstrom* isn't it also true of the audio track of *Marilyn on Marilyn*? Baron makes the same point later in the book when she notes that

We know what will happen to these people, but at the moment portrayed in their amateur films, they clearly have no idea what is in store for them, a fact that produces a tragic sense of loss – the archive effect.¹⁶

In *Marilyn on Marilyn* this has a double application, since not only the young girl and woman depicted in the home movies, out takes and newsreels but also the older woman whose voice can be heard on the soundtrack both evoke a temporal disparity – long in the images, painfully but dramatically short in the audio track - between the moment of recording and the moment of her death and a much longer one again between the moment of her death and the moment of these home movies and interview recordings first being broadcast.

Baron's concepts are particularly germane to *Marilyn on Marilyn* and *Billie on Billie*, but it is useful here to turn to Renov's term 'shared textual authority' which describes what he calls the 'shared camera' of domestic ethnographic filmmaking.¹⁷ Renov had previously argued that the trope of the 'shared camera' effects "an erosion of textual authority or directorial control [which] is endemic to domestic ethnography..."¹⁸ Hagedoorn, following Renov, argues that *The Maelstrom*, *Grizzly Man* and *My Architect* (2003) by virtue of their shared textual authority, destabilize notions like biography and autobiography.¹⁹ The implication of Hagedoorn's argument – and of Lebow's, Austen's and Renov's - is that authorship is destabilised too, but none of them quite develop this notion.

However, Hagedoorn does argue that the practice of found footage filmmaking complicates the identity of the biographer in such films. "Through its prominent use of found footage, *The Maelstrom* problematizes the notions of both autobiography and biography in documentary filmmaking... No explicit 'voice-of-authority' commentary (whether written or spoken) is included in *The Maelstrom*."²⁰ Rather than defining *The Maelstrom* as biographical or autobiographical, Hagedoorn describes it as sharing textual authority, in a form of 'collaborative autobiography.'²¹ She deploys this concept to describe documentary work where "two or more parties are included in the production of an autobiographical text through the process of shared textual authority..."²² But of course in the case of *Marilyn on Marilyn* and *Billie on Billie*, (and indeed, all television documentaries) far more than two people were engaged in their production, not to mention determinants beyond the agency of individual programme-makers. Having spent twenty five years at the coal-face of television production I am fully aware of the numerous contributors the making of any programme involves, from commissioning editors and executive producers to film and picture researchers, production managers, dubbing mixers, colour graders and, of course, editors. Nevertheless, these two documentaries particularly bear out the proposals of Renov and Hagedoorn. And if the term collaborative is assumed to imply working together rather than being employed on the same project, then perhaps Lebow's formulations ('assisted autobiography' and 'posthumous authorship' above) or Austen's ('double authorship') are preferable.

15 Jaimie Baron, 2014, p. 40.

16 Jaimie Baron, 2014, p. 86–87.

17 Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 2004, p. 222.

18 Michael Renov, 'Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the 'Other' Self' in Michael Renov and Jane Gaines, eds, in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 147.

19 Hagedoorn, "Look what I found!": (Re-)crossing boundaries between public/private history and biography/autobiography in Péter Forgács' 'The Maelstrom' in *Studies in Documentary Film*, 3(2), 2009.

20 Hagedoorn, 2009, pp. 177–192.

21 Hagedoorn, 2009 p. 190

22 Hagedoorn, 2009, p. 190

10 The Archive Documentary and the Sound Track

Marilyn on Marilyn in particular is a kind of 'compilation film', constructed almost exclusively from archival footage.²³ Unlike the films of others mentioned above, however, it was not constructed from footage shot by only one or two previous filmmakers (as was the case with the footage filmed by Timothy Treadwell in *Grizzly Man*, or by the Friedmans in *Capturing the Friedmans*) as the films discussed by Hagedoorn were. Instead, it is a collage of many different kinds of film – newly shot material, stock footage, home movies, screen tests, out-takes from newsreels, and so on. Where the films directed by Jarecki, Kahn and Herzog all made use of footage shot by others (in the cases of Jarecki and Herzog's films, by their subjects themselves), I refer here not only to *Marilyn on Marilyn*'s visual components - which comprise a wide range of archive footage – but also, and crucially, to its audio track, specifically its voice-over. This was constructed from the editing together of extracts from two non-broadcast interviews, conducted for magazine articles and recorded on reel-to-reel tape recorders towards the end of Monroe's life. These interviews, for *Life* magazine and *Marie Claire* (Paris) by Richard Meryman and Georges Belmont respectively, provide some of the key documentary material for the film and are, arguably, where Renov's notion of 'shared textual authority' applies to *Marilyn on Marilyn*.



Photo 1. Cover of the *Life* Magazine issue that carried Richard Meryman's interview with Marilyn Monroe.

²³ Stelle Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, Routledge, 2006, p. 26.

11 Autobiography and Documentary

As Renov has pointed out, autobiography is a form “in which the author, the narrator, and the protagonist are identical.”²⁴ One way of approaching *Marilyn on Marilyn* is thus as a work in which the narrator and protagonist are identical but conventionally, at least, the author is not. And yet I want to suggest here – following Renov’s and, more specifically, Hagedoorns’s conception of ‘shared textual authority’ – that while Monroe neither personally filmed nor recorded any of the sounds or images in *Marilyn on Marilyn* she was, in some sense, ‘recruited’ by the film as a kind of posthumous collaborator. Renov notes that “the word ‘autobiography’ is composed of three principal parts – ‘auto’, ‘bio’ and ‘graphy’ – which make up the essential ingredients of this representational form: a self, a life and a writing practice.”²⁵ *Marilyn on Marilyn* is thus a form of filmic ‘writing’ about the ‘life’ of a specific – although, in a sense, fictional – ‘self’: Marilyn Monroe. Like several of the films Renov discusses, *Marilyn on Marilyn* is also based on interviews, but I did not conduct them, nor were they filmed.

12 The Archive and Provenance

Bruzzi usefully characterises two common modes of archival usage, with the former “not asking the spectator to question the archival documents but simply to absorb them as a component of a larger narrative,” noting that in such archive-reliant modes the ‘provenance’ of such footage is rarely an issue.²⁶ The provenance of the archival sound recordings is explicitly revealed in the inter-titles at the beginning of *Marilyn on Marilyn*, but we are not, as viewers, encouraged to be entirely credulous of them. Discussing *Marilyn on Marilyn* in her book, *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe*, Sarah Churchwell argues that,

The film opens, cannily, with a preamble that raises the question of her relationship to her own words and to the truth.. In other words, even Monroe’s speech is (rightly) problematized by the film from the beginning, in raising the question of how deliberately she presented her ‘self’ to her audience; of the way in which answers were elicited by the simple fact of being interviewed, by a self-conscious presentation of her identity as a performance; and of whether she might be lying.²⁷

Bruzzi’s second category of archival usage concerns the deployment of found footage in the kind of documentary where “the derivation of such archive is a significant issue and which frequently uses such footage dialectically or against the grain.”²⁸ *Marilyn on Marilyn* attempts to use found footage and amateur film in ways both poetically evocative (rather than prosaically illustrative) and against the grain – at least the grain of expectation – using outtakes rather than already-edited sequences from newsreels, snatched home movies rather than polished feature film clips. One potential avenue for such usage, if the expository ‘objective’ route is not taken, is that of exploring subjectivity, memory.

13 The Face and the Voice

In an essay on biographical documentary, John Corner notes that “Given the rich readability of the face, it is not surprising that biographical documentaries typically do a lot of ‘face work,’ combining facial images with different kinds of speech and music...”²⁹ The face of a film star like Marilyn Monroe is, at least superficially, a quintessentially readable entry point, the default image for such a documentary. But on the same page Corner also notes the

24 Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 2004, p. xi.

25 Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. xii.

26 Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, Routledge, 2006,

27 Sarah Churchwell, *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe*, Granta, 2004, pp. 107–108.

28 Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, Routledge, 2006, p. 26.

29 John Corner, ‘Biography Within the Documentary Frame: A Note’, *Framework*: 43:1 2002, p. 99.

importance of recorded voice in giving the 'viewer' access to subjectivity, not least in counterpoint to conventional voiced-over commentary.

In *Marilyn on Marilyn* 'recorded voice' or, more precisely, the pre-recorded voice of Monroe, is transformed into 'voiced-over commentary' and this, by upsetting the conventional hierarchies of sound and image in documentary, including biographical documentary, inevitably complicates its status. Jeffrey K. Rouff, echoing Nichols, outlines the conventional hierarchy of documentary voices as follows: "The clarity of sound in documentary usually depends on the degree of control that the filmmaker has over the pro-filmic events. Voice over narration allows for maximum control over sound quality..."³⁰ Of course, when voice over is recorded not in a sound booth but as an audio interview on location on a reel to reel tape recorder, such assumptions are overturned. Indeed, I want to argue that *Marilyn on Marilyn* disturbs the conventional distinction between on-screen interviewee and filmmaker voice-over, both formally and technically. Thus when Rouff suggests "The lack of clarity of the (observational) sound undermines the communicative intent of these films," *Marilyn on Marilyn* seems to reverse Rouff's rule.³¹ The very lack of clarity and the apparent 'amateurishness' of the recording of Monroe's voice actually reinforces its power as voice-over, appearing to give us access to her inner voice, in an intimate, as if unmediated, confessional manner.

14 The Home Movie and Sound

Discussing Abraham Zapruder's celebrated 8mm footage of the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas (1963), Stella Bruzzi suggests that, "The discrepancy between quality and magnitude of content and the Zapruder film's accidental nature make it particularly compelling."³² Such discrepancy applies equally to amateur (and equally silent) footage of Kennedy's equally iconic 'contemporary' - Marilyn Monroe. Furthermore, I will argue that the discrepancy Bruzzi refers to remains as applicable to sound recordings as recorded images. The home movie, non-professional quality of Zapruder's images finds an echo in the metallic, slightly distorted sound quality of the reel-to-reel recordings of Marilyn Monroe's voice answering questions for a magazine interview – rather than for broadcast.

For Bruzzi, amateur footage (and, by extension, non-professional audio recording) offers "an alternative point of view, a perspective that is partly predicated upon the absencing of the film's auteur."³³ Rather than claiming a status for myself as an auteur, absent or present, I want to argue that *Marilyn on Marilyn* recruited the late actress's voice to 'share textual authority', not just as a posthumous narrator but as a kind of audible 'silent partner' in the film and specifically in the narration, an unwitting co-author and posthumous auto-biographical collaborator. It is thus primarily with Monroe, as well as with her two interviewers, and finally with the literally anonymous makers of the archive footage re-used in the film that I and the other programme-makers of *Marilyn on Marilyn* share textual authority.

15 *Marilyn on Marilyn* and Narration

But what does it mean for a documentary's 'voice' or more specifically its voice-over to be delegated to such a 'shared' author? In a chapter on 'Narration', Bruzzi discusses the conventional assumption that '...voice over narration (is)... arguably the most blatant example of intervention on the part of the documentary filmmaker'.³⁴ She notes that "whereas in a fiction film the voice-off is traditionally that of a character in the narrative, in a documentary the voice over is more usually that of a disembodied and omniscient narrator."³⁵ In *Marilyn on Marilyn*, we attempted to avoid this, not to

30 Jeffrey K Rouff, 'Conventions of Sound in Documentary' in Rick Altman, *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, Routledge 1992 p. 222.

31 Rouff in Altman, 1992, p. 224.

32 Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, Routledge, 2000 p. 13.

33 Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 2nd Ed., Routledge, 2006, p. 18.

34 Stella Bruzzi, 2006, p. 46.

35 Stella Bruzzi, 2006, p. 47.

conceal our own role in the production of the film, but in order to allow Marilyn's own voice to narrate it, hence the decision to constrain the conventionally omniscient filmmaker's verbal guidance to the minimum number of on screen captions (the minimum acceptable to the BBC that is – whose executive producer had initially urged we also use traditional, 'expository' voice-over commentary).

Bruzzi cites Mary Ann Doane's remark that "it is precisely because the voice (in a documentary) is not localisable, because it cannot be yoked to a body, that it is capable of interpreting the image, producing the truth."³⁶ The only exceptions to this rule that Bruzzi discusses are the 'performative' documentaries of Michael Moore and Nick Broomfield. But *Marilyn on Marilyn* and *Billie on Billie* seem to me to warrant consideration as exceptions too. For, like Bruzzi's auteur examples, they could be said to fracture "the tacit documentary 'pact' that the voice-over will remain objective."³⁷

16 The Female Narrator in Television Documentary

Bruzzi usefully identifies two distinct strategies for female narration since the 1990s – as either objective voice of God or as subjective voice of the filmmaker. However *Marilyn on Marilyn*, and, to a lesser extent, *Billie on Billie* both require a third category, that of the posthumous narrator, neither the director herself nor the omniscient narrator in the audio booth. Significantly, perhaps, Bruzzi also notes how an equivalence is often assumed between a woman's voice as physical utterance and as metaphoric access of her inner self.³⁸ That very sleight of hand was one of the strategies of *Marilyn on Marilyn*, aiming to create an impression of an intimate interiority about one woman's inner self or selves by virtue of 'shared textual authority'. Not through literally sharing the camera with her, or indeed the microphone or tape recorder, but nevertheless by allowing her voice to tell her own story – and excluding any other such voices. This is not to deny, of course, who finally controlled the selection and juxtaposition of extracts of that voice's utterances. But then this also remains the case in Renov and Hagedoorn's canonic examples.

If the voice on the audio track can provide an illusion of unmediated access to an inner self so too can the image. In an essay on self-inscription in first person films Renov describes how filmmaker Faith Hubley offers "visual correlatives for elusive interior states" in her *My Universe Inside Out* (1996).³⁹ He goes on to suggest that if default documentary actuality is, by definition, exterior, objectively observable, then autobiography's terrain is interior, subjective and ultimately invisible. Thus, for Renov, correlatives for subjective interiority on the visual track can function to reinforce the status of the speaker's voice on the audio track as somehow objective. Yet of course, in *Marilyn on Marilyn*, that voice is that of the subject herself, Marilyn Monroe.

Video 12. A trailer marking the 30th Anniversary of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983). Go to [the online version of this article](#) to watch it.

How then does the image track of *Marilyn on Marilyn* attempt to sustain the illusion of such interiority? Jerome Rafferty, discussing Chris Marker, has claimed that 'the far flung documentary images of *Sans Soleil* (aka *Sunless*) (1983) are assembled as an autobiography – the form has no subject, except the consciousness, the memory of the man who shot it - yet Marker attributes this consciousness to the invented 'Sandor Krasna', removes it from himself to a yet more spectral entity.'⁴⁰ In *Marilyn on Marilyn* the documentary images are also assembled as the autobiography of a consciousness, a memory - but not that of the filmmakers who compiled it, nor of the two journalists who recorded the interviews which provide its voice, nor indeed of the many anonymous filmmakers whose stock footage of Los Angeles is included, but of the woman who 'narrates' it. Like Sandor Krasna, however, she too is in some senses a fictional

36 Mary Ann Doane cited in Stella Bruzzi, 2006, p. 63.

37 Stella Bruzzi, 2006, p. 63.

38 Stella Bruzzi, 2000, p. 58.

39 Michael Renov, 'First person films: some theses on self-inscription' in Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong, eds, *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives and Practices*, Open University Press, 2008 p. 42.

40 Jerome Rafferty, cited in Bruzzi, 2006, p. 67.

character, the actress Marilyn Monroe, also known as Norma Jeane Baker. As Renov puts it, "...the subject in documentary has, to a surprising degree, become the subject of documentary."⁴¹ Thus the double or indeed multiple authorship of *Marilyn on Marilyn*, its 'shared textual authority', not only disturbs the conventional attributions of authorship in documentary film, but also the very objectivity of the exterior reality being documented. Appropriately enough, in the Library Catalogue of Middlesex University, I discovered on my arrival here that *Marilyn on Marilyn* is listed as having four authors – Monroe, Marilyn; Kerr, Paul; Belmont, Georges; and Meryman, Richard.

Biography

Dr Paul Kerr began his career as an archivist in the National Film Archive, before spending over 20 years working in television, initially as a film researcher but then as a producer/director and series producer for the BBC and C4, working on dozens of arts and history programmes. In 1990 he launched and ran BBC2's long-running and award-winning cinema series *Moving Pictures* (1990-1996). Making programmes about film and television necessitated an ongoing relationship with archives and in 2001 he produced and directed a documentary about Marilyn Monroe, *Marilyn on Marilyn* for BBC2. This is an archive-based 'autobiography' of the star, using only her own voice-over narration (with no other voices or interviews) to tell her own story. The film was very successful in both ratings and critical terms for the channel and three more films in the same mode were commissioned. In 2007 he left TV and took up a role as Senior Lecturer at London Metropolitan University. In 2013 he received his PhD and joined Middlesex University where he is now a Director of Programmes for Creative Production Industries and teaches on the BA Hons Television Production.

41 Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. xxiv.