4.1 First Person Political

ALISA LEBOW

As much as the nation and the groups within it can find voice in the documentary, so too can the individual – and not just as a film's subject. For the film-maker, documentary can be a medium for autobiography. First person films now speak for a generation who might previously have adopted more collectivist third-person positions as documentarists.

THE PERSONAL REVOLUTIONARY VOICE

There is an anxiety lurking behind much of the scholarly work on first person film, including my own, that deserves to be addressed head on: it prompts the positive assertions that first person film is inevitably political; it propels the position that first person film is inherently relational; it informs decisions to seek first person films outside of the predictable contexts of the self-absorbed, individualistically minded West. This anxiety can be posed in the form of a question: are first person films simply a by-product of the failure of the revolutionary movements and the rise of identity politics in the 1970s, only to gain momentum in the neo-liberal 80s and beyond? To break it down further, what remains of politics once the communist and socialist collective aims seem to have collapsed with no viable liberatory alternative to replace them? The concern is that identity politics surged in to fill the ideological vacuum left in the wake of this collapse and with it came the fragmentation and individualisation of political claims, with, at best, reformist aims. Is the proliferation of first person documentary simply a consequence of this development?

Michael Chanan, in his book *The Politics of Documentary*, responds to these questions in the affirmative, when he asserts with some conviction that,

> what unfolded in the heartlands of capitalism was a passage from the politics of class to the identity politics and social movements which followed the feminist turn of the 70s, in which conventional boundaries of social identity were dissolved and subjective selfhood was asserted in forms which challenged old certainties.[1]

With this passage – from one politics to the next – Chanan believes, comes the emergence of first person film. Yet despite his apparent easy acceptance of this transition, the political left has in various ways expressed concern – or anxiety – over this very matter, which is often regarded as a shift from the certainties provided by the notion of the universal subject to the much less unified question of subjectivities. Indeed, this shift has provoked much hand-wringing on the left, with the fear that the Political, with a capital 'P' would necessarily be dispersed and diluted into a series of competing sectarian concerns.[2] What basis for mass movement lies in this individualist dead end? What neo-liberal divide-and-rule policy subtends such factionalisation? Can the left ultimately sustain itself on a diet of particularism? It was with some of these concerns in mind that an esteemed scholarly journal of aesthetics convened a high-level academic symposium in November of 1991 in New York, assembling some of the best minds of the day, to address this 'question of identity' specifically as it relates to the political.[3] I go back to this moment as it signals the time when critical theory had to recognise the shift and makes sense of it. It is essentially the same moment when first person films began to gain currency in North America, and were soon, within a decade, to proliferate elsewhere around the world as well.

With few exceptions (and quite a number of caveats), it seems these scholars were willing and prepared to accept this shift and to find the politically relevant dimensions to it. Ernesto Laclau, for instance, saw the shift towards particularism as an important corrective against the arrogant universalism of the European left, and a crucial step towards undermining the hegemony of Eurocentrism with its 'privileged agent of history'.[4] Chantal Mouffe was inclined to integrate claims arising from identity-based political movements into notions of the new citizen of radical democracy.[5] Stanley Aronowitz claimed that the emergence of identity politics was a 'breath of fresh air compared to the stifling environments of liberal and Marxist hegemonies'.[6]

Importantly, Laclau posits that already inherent in the particular is some notion of the universal or what we might call 'the collective' wherein any appeal to individual identities always had to imply some belief or adherence to

a set of generally held principles, 'such as the right to self determination'.[7] Thus, for Laclau and the other participants, the ultimate conclusion was that there was no need to insist on reading identity politics as necessarily apolitical and non-revolutionary. I reference Laclau here to suggest by implication that the perceived individualism (i.e., particularism) of first person films also depends upon an appeal to more general, and even at times universal, principles of identification. In other words, in the best of cases, when a first person film-maker makes a film about his mother, her lover, her neighbourhood, his sexuality, s/he is at once speaking for and about him/herself, while speaking to and with much larger and indeed politically relevant and resonant collectivities. Moreover, s/he can be said to be addressing an even broader audience with the potential for identification that transcends such particularisms. This is obviously the case with first person films that take as their object directly political aims, however it is not my intention here to confuse the political content of a film (first person or otherwise) with the constitutive political and ideological implications of the modality or mode of address itself. In this chapter, when speaking of 'the political' in first person film, I am not speaking of the political themes it treats, but of the ways in which it enacts – in the sense of putting into practice – a politics.

There are other, somewhat contradictory, political and ideological objections to the first person impulse in film, which suggest that rather than seeing it as a by-product of the demise of the left, it can be seen, just as problematically, as a retrograde form which is insensible to the deconstruction of subjectivity, unaware of the cries declaring the death of the author issued from Barthes onward. This is a point raised by Laura Rascaroli in her impressive study on the essay film.[8] While this remains a concern, it does not account for those first person films which complicate authorship by initiating shared authorship strategies or by simply refusing to perpetuate the illusion of the unified subject.[9] In other words, not all first person films are stuck in an auteurist bubble, a throwback to days heralding the authority of the author, but can be patently and determinedly ensconced in, and constituted by, the discourses of the day. Thus, first person films are neither reducible to narcissistic monologues, nor to authorial indulgences, but, as Rascaroli also notes, may go some distance in undermining certainty (anti-objectivist as they are) and relativising truth. They also always imply an address, even a dialogue, with the spectator 'within a shared space of embodied subjectivity',[10] which creates the ground for an engagement with, if not a participation in, a collectivity much larger than the self.

Admittedly, this 'dialogue' can sometimes remain within a narrow frame. There is nothing that says that an anti-objectivist stance or a shared space of embodied subjectivity per se are implicitly destabilising and thus political,

in the sense I intend it, which is, as you will note, very much in the vein in which Rancière proposes. To be sure, the vast majority of first person films pouring out of especially anglophone western countries only serve to reaffirm hegemonic values by positing a liberal humanist subject who can afford to assume a commonality with his (and it is usually a he) audience based on notions of individual liberties and rights assumed to be shared by all, wilfully ignoring systemic inequities and their own implicit parochial and exclusionary positionalities. Think only of the patriotic pandering of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004, USA), as he assumes a shared pride in 'American values' and uses melodramatic gestures to play on the sympathies of his audience (always posited as American) for a mother who lost her son in Iraq while completely ignoring the (then) hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who lost theirs. Or the film *My Kidnapper* (Mark Henderson and Kate Horne, 2010, UK) that attempts to portray the Marxist Rebels of Columbia as a band of thugs willing to hypocritically snatch individuals' freedoms away when they claim to be fighting for Freedom. Such an inversion, while logical within the rhetorics of western liberalism, simply reveals the ways in which individualist ideology is utterly uncomprehending in the face of collective revolutionary struggles, and shows precisely how first person film can work to sustain hegemonic systems of belief. In Rancière's terms, these would be examples of 'consensus'.[11] So, to be clear, I am not arguing that all first person films, or the first person modality, is always and inevitably politically and ideologically subversive. I am simply attempting to advance the argument that the first person modality is not inherently apolitical or politically retrograde (in spite of the undeniable fact that at times it can be), and can, in fact, entail a radical critique of subjectivity, while also, as I hope to show, enacting the political by 'refram[ing] the given … [and] inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible'.[12]

This set of film-making practices we are calling first-person films, while not easily or reasonably definable in terms of any necessary aesthetic or generic elements, seem nonetheless to raise the spectre of a tendency towards atomised and individualist (and thus ideologically conservative) modes of self-expression. Yet they, like any other artistic practice, have the potential to create – in Rancière's words, 'new forms of perception of the given'. As he says, 'similar to political action, [they effectuate] a change in the distribution of the sensible'.[13] Of course, he rightly notes that there is no straight path from the viewing of a spectacle to an understanding of the 'state of the world', but at its best, first person film can produce 'a conflict between sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it … [redrawing] the frame within which common objects are determined'.[14] So it is as *dissensus*, as laid out by Rancière here, that I contend first person film can enact the political.

I have, in my own explorations of this mode of address, found it extremely illuminating to look further afield, beyond the immediately obvious examples of first person film-making available to a western audience[15] to films benefiting from cultural, philosophical, ideological and political assumptions less overwhelming steeped in the liberal humanist rhetorics of individualist rights and liberties. It is here where we may be more likely find the first-person modality at its most fiercely destabilising. This is not to say that, in this era of so-called globalisation, mass migration and worldwide webs of information circulation, that there is any sphere left untouched or unaffected by the ideologies mobilised by western capitalism, but that, despite concern over (undue) influence, there is nonetheless the consideration of diverse cultural and political contexts that necessarily refract the meanings and implications of the individual's articulation on film through different prisms. So my enquiry here will take two turns: one into the past to look at what could be considered two 'ur'-texts of the first person filmic mode of address, each from very different moments and geopolitical vantage points, that may tell us something about drives other than narcissism and ideologies other than neo-liberalism motivating such an articulation; and the second is an exploration of more contemporary work, from a context in which first person films do not frequently arise and have few historical precedents – in this case, a trilogy of films by the Lebanese film-maker Mohamed Soueid. Both turns allow us to consider the ways in which first person film enacts 'the political'.

Let me begin by referencing one of the best-known and most frequently cited masterpieces of the early 'City Symphony' vein: Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929, USSR). We know it as a classic of early cinema, an innovation in style and aesthetics, a harbinger of a range of contemporary movements in documentary from cinéma vérité (the name itself a homage to Vertov's *kino pravda*) and the political documentaries of Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin (made under the collective name the Dziga Vertov Group), to the observation of the everyday, generally associated with the North American documentary movement Direct Cinema. The film is, of course, a paean to the collectivist values of the Russian Revolution and a veritable explosion of creative energy, all harnessed in the service of awakening the masses to the truth of their new revolutionary condition. It was also, and this part is less frequently noted, one of the very first 'family affairs' on film (after the Lumière's *Feeding the Baby*, 1895, France). Surely it would not do to claim *Man with a Movie Camera* strictly as a first person film since it is that and so much more; much less would we want reduce it to the status of home movie, but it is important to note for our purposes that the members of Vertov's inner circle of 'kinoks' – the man standing in as the film-maker is Vertov's brother,

Mikhail Kaufman, and the woman behind the editing table is his wife Elizaveta Svilova – are, for this film, surrogates of the film-maker, a trope not at all unfamiliar in later expressions of the filmic first person.[16] Vertov's personal mode of expression passionately conveyed a commitment to the principles that the film professes, as if the film-maker and the above mentioned team of *kinoks* could stand in metonymically for the apotheosis of revolutionary values and lessons. Indeed, we can see in the film a series of substitutions, beginning with Kaufman as Vertov's surrogate, the proverbial man behind the 'man with the movie camera'. There is also the visual rhyming which analogises film editing as a form of spinning, weaving together meaning from strands and spools of film; and then the editor, Svilova, as image-weaver, who becomes an exemplary 'worker' in the factory of meaning-making. Of course, the steady and constitutive repetition of the idea of the cycle (from the spinning of the factory and the film spools or the rotation of train wheels, to the grand themes of the life cycle, and that of the Earth rotating around the sun from dawn to dusk), even the meaning of Vertov's assumed name, which translates as 'spinning top' (his real name was Dennis Arkadievich Kaufman), all allude to or indeed stand in for, the inexorability of political 'revolution'. In effect, Vertov puts himself and his immediate family directly in the service of the revolution, not only by making films for the revolution, but by example. A more thoroughgoing alignment of the particular and the universal, the individual and the collective, could hardly be made.

Fast forward forty-five years to another place and time entirely and we find with Hara Kazuo's *Extreme Private Eros: A Love Story* (1974, Japan) another, considerably more intimate, enactment of the political in first person film. While in the West at this time, outside of the practices of a handful of experimental film-makers like Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage, documentary had yet to

Extreme Private Eros: A Love Story (1974): another, considerably more intimate, enactment of the political in first person film

fully articulate its first person address, Hara Kazuo, along with other Japanese film-makers, began exploring the limits of the first person mode in unflinching detail. According to one of the very few sources on the topic available in English, the movement, known as the 'self-documentary' (*serufu dokyumentarii*) or I-film in Japan, began in the late 1960s with a focus on 'ordinary events'.[17] It is argued by Nada Hisashi, that the release of Mekas's *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* in Japan in 1973 made a very strong impression on Japanese 'amateur' film-makers, suggesting to them that the events that happen to ordinary people are worthy of representation in film.[18] In a general sense it can be said, as indeed Nada does, that *Extreme Private Eros* had no direct connection to any social incident or politics.[19] This, however, seems to entirely miss the point of the film, which while in part is surely a personal indulgence – as the film-maker undertakes to obsessively track the whereabouts of his lover who left him – is also an aesthetically challenging film that stands as a remarkable record of the zeitgeist of the times, embodying and enacting changing worldviews that certainly have political implications and ramifications.[20]

In the film, Hara's ex-lover leaves him, first to get involved with another woman, and later with an African American GI in Okinawa, with the intention, it seems, to have an interracial baby. The nascent feminist movement, the recent reintegration of Okinawa back to Japan, race politics in Japan, are all issues brought to the fore in this deceptively self-absorbed film. At first glance, in a case of life imitating art, this film-maker appears to be the real-life incarnation, albeit the Japanese doppel-gänger, of the narcissistic protagonist of the 1967 mocku-mentary *David Holzman's Diary* (Jim McBride). McBride imagined that the lightweight, portable equipment developed in the early 1960s and put into the service of

David Holzman's Diary (1967): the spoof proleptically comes before the genre or the form

outwardly oriented observational techniques would inevitably take film-makers beyond their fascination with observing the life of others, only to turn their cameras upon themselves, with the same driving passion and tenacity. McBride's dystopic vision, wherein the epony-mous title character essentially films the mundane aspects of his life ad infinitum and to no good end, is a leftist cautionary tale: down this road lies the infinite regress of meaningless, apolitical self-absorption. And thus with Hara's film too, we might want to contend that in its indulgence of the personal it is an indictment of that very mode, a kind of self-reflexive exercise in excess that forces us to recognise the degraded state of political commitment in documentary.

Although I can think of no other case where the spoof proleptically comes before the genre or the form, we can say, with some relief, that McBride's dystopic vision has never been entirely realised (YouTube diary videos notwithstanding). Even with Hara's admittedly extreme excursions into the private realm of intimate relations, the film as a whole, and the characters within it, all have something important to 'say' about a host of political, eth-ical and cultural concerns. And, beyond this, the film's form itself poses a direct challenge to received political, social and representational norms at its core.

We can begin by analysing the taboos broken within the film. Hara's ex, Miyuki Takeda, transgresses more than sexual and racial miscegenation taboos, when she chooses to live first with her female lover, then among sex workers in Okinawa, later with her African American lover and eventually in a commune, all the while offering her highly idiosyncratic theories about child-rearing and, most star-tlingly, when she insists on being filmed while giving birth unassisted to her second child. There seems to be no limit beyond which Miyuki – and her co-conspirator, Hara – will not go, and absolutely no sense of a 'private' sphere that should be kept from view. With a title like *Extreme Private Eros*, I suppose it should come as no surprise that after one particularly tense scene between Miyuki and Hara's cur-rent girlfriend, we find our vision undulating rhythmically, perilously near Miyuki's face which periodically contorts in unmistakable sexual pleasure. But it is nonetheless slightly alarming, as one finds oneself virtually making love to this woman, the camera following the movements of the film-maker as he thrusts into his lover, filming all the while. I can think of no other documentary scene shot from the perspective of a male lover as he has intercourse with a woman. Even pornographic films tend not to take such a view, fixated as they are on the sexual anatomy and the money shot. But here the viewer is given the precise point of view of the male lover, caught right in the middle of the act, as it were.[21]

Beyond the explicitness and forthrightness of the rep-resentation in this scene, and also surely in the unassisted

birthing scene (where, despite the fact that the film-maker in later interviews said he simply retreated behind the camera and thought only of film-making,[22] he shoots the entire scene out of focus in an obvious indication of his absolutely freaked-out state of mind), it is the anarchic desire to smash prevailing norms and conventions, both formally and thematically, that is so telling about this film. Through its formal method as much as its subject, it exposes a post-war generational movement in Japan intent on shattering traditional values and carving its own path. Whether it could ever succeed in doing so based on the reactive rebelliousness displayed by Miyuki is questionable, but to only read the film based on the characters within it, wild as they may be, would not do justice to the real power and political implications of this film.[23] It is a film that intervenes in the age-old divide, radically rupturing the split between private and public, breaking all received social norms and arguably laying the ground for radical change. I do not merely want to situate these characters as social signifiers – signs of the times – but to suggest that the forthright, in-your-face, iconoclastic character of the film itself along with its first person mode of address should be read as a radically destabilising political gesture: a sign or symptom of dissensus. It can be seen as a prelude to radical change – the first step being the destruction of traditional (bourgeois) norms.

As you can see, I do not simply hope to assert that these first person iterations, and those to which I will refer shortly, are political in that they are either directly tied to political or social movements or that they take as their direct subject the structures and processes of the political. What I am attempting to argue for is an embodied and integrated politics, where the filmic strategy itself – of placing the film-maker at the centre of the revolutionary metaphor (Vertov) or breaking down the fabric of the social, redistributing the sensible, to paraphrase Rancière, through the film-maker's personal/political incursions (Hara) – is a way of enacting the political.

As John Corner rightly notes, 'there is a sense in which all documentaries are political',[24] and yet to say this is to say only that it is within the 'horizon of expectation'[25] to be so. In fact, it is this very expectation that leads to the concern about the possible apoliticality of first person film, since they also represent a departure from some of documentary's traditionally identifying characteristics – most pronouncedly, its adherence to a posture of objectivity. The objective stance has stood as a guarantor of what Bill Nichols has famously called a 'discourse of sobriety'.[26] It is what authorises documentary to tread into the consequential realm of the political. And it is precisely this intrusion of the personal, subjective, particular, that seems to threaten this authority, hence prompting the anxiety upon which this chapter uneasily rests. As if it needs to be stated, more than thirty years after its first articulation, the personal is indeed and must be seen as political. I mean this not only in the sense that the feminists famously sloganised, but also in the sense that Simon Critchley reads Jean-Luc Nancy, where the personal, or shall we say, subjectivity, is always intersubjective. Critchley argues that Nancy insists on seeing subjectivity as intersubjectivity precisely to be able to retain a notion of collectivity necessary for political action. It is the condition upon which we can make political claims in the wake of communism and socialism, in that it allows for 'the exigency to say "we"'.[27] Here we must combine Nancy's notion of intersubjectivity with Rancière's concept of dissensus, allowing us to register the first person plural of this filmic modality as it intervenes in the distribution of the sensible. We must do it if we are to grasp that which is – or can be – political in first person film.

IN VERTOV'S WAKE

If earlier I used the example of Vertov to exemplify an artist whose first person address was intended to signal a thoroughgoing integration with the revolutionary spirit, then I wish to close with an example of an artist's work that emerges out of the cinders of the failure of revolution. Where Vertov availed himself of the first person modality in the wake of a successful revolution, Lebanese film-maker Mohamed Soueid takes recourse to it in the wake of extinguished hopes.[28]

First person film-making in the Arabic-speaking world has so far, generally, emerged only in those regions where the incessant over-mediation associated with war and violent conflict has created the conditions into which the intrepid first person film-maker seems compelled to find his or her voice. We see this most explicitly in the case of Lebanon and Palestine, though increasingly also in Iraq. As space is too limited here for a thorough investigation of the entire range of first person film-making in the region, I will focus the remainder of my remarks on the work of a Lebanese film-maker for whom the conditions of political engagement – in armed struggle, civil war, resistance against occupation, defeat, disenchantment and disengagement from an ideological commitment/affiliation, disenfranchisement, alienation from home and polity – all provide ripe circumstances for the development of his idiosyncratic first person films.

Mohamed Soueid was a revolutionary student activist in the 1970s, turned film critic in the 80s and, eventually, film-maker in the 90s. In the years leading up to and immediately following the turn of this century, he directed a series of extended filmic meditations on the destiny of his dismantled student brigade after the civil war[29] that loosely fall into the tradition of the poetic essay. His *Tango of Yearning* (1998), *Nightfall* (2000) and *Civil War* (2002) draw portraits of his fellow fighters – defeated, scarred, disenfranchised – the forgotten soldiers of a revolution that

failed in its promise. He tracks their destiny, how they reconstituted their lives in Beirut, itself emerging battered and bereft after a series of devastating wars.[30]

In his films, Beirut appears paradoxically as a city where nothing is as it seems while, at the same time, everything beckons to be read at face value. The car mechanic is a refined cook, the disillusioned alcoholic a heartbreaking poet, the brash woman a broken widow and the family dentist a highly attuned philosopher. The face value of things is nonetheless to be read on the sides of bullet-pocked buildings and in the endless stock of vacant lots. The demoralisation of the people in the films can be read on the surface of the street, which, despite its bustling traffic and gaudy advertisements, continues to unwittingly display, as if one of its many wares, the desolation of war.

Soueid's own obsessions take the fore in all three films: in *Tango of Yearning*, the fixation is with cinema itself (the industry of fiction-making, in a country tirelessly captive to its history and whose history has no official chronicle); in *Nightfall*, with the defeat of the political movement to which he was affiliated; and in *Civil War*, again cinema, dentistry and the ineffability of life. Ultimately, though, each film of the three, in its way, thematises the film-maker's hollow struggle to find meaning in post-war Beirut.

One feels throughout the trilogy (which belatedly transformed into a quartet with *My Heart Beats Only for Her* [2009]), not entirely unlike the experience of being on the streets of Beirut, that the war could resume at any moment. But in the interval that could last a lifetime (or a split second), life goes on and a sign of that ongoing-ness is the struggle to find oneself and the shattered remains of one's own and one's comrades' beliefs. But belief requires certainty whether in relation to the chronology of events, the guiding principles of political commitment, or even the concrete facts on the ground, all of which shift before us like some admixture of phantasmagoria and quicksand. That is to say, one can easily lose the grip of actuality in Soueid's films, where his imaginative flights of fancy intertwine so seamlessly with the rhythms of the street that one can never be sure when the life of the street transitions into the life of the film-maker's mind. There is a cock-eyed logic to these impressions that parallels the illogic of the war: in Lebanon, to date, there has been no official version of the conflict proffered by the ruling powers and people are indeed left to sort out their impressions and experiences independently.

The desire to reconstruct a record of the war, to propose a narrative for a lived experience fraught with failures and ruptures, the chronicles of lives told in seemingly incoherent fragments whose coherence can only be pieced from the collective memory of individuals, drives this series. One has the impression from Soueid's work that this story needs and deserves the space to be as erratic,

impressionistic and as impossible to make sense of as the war itself was. Remember, despite the seeming interminability of that war, there were numerous lulls in fighting and innumerable shifts in allegiances, so that who was fighting whom at any given time was subject to change, as were the loyalties of any given faction.

Mohamed Soueid fought with the Palestine Student Brigade in his youth, a group of young, leftist, pan-Arabists, trained by the PLO, fighting alongside a constellation of secular, progressive multi-confessional coalition of parties and forces (the 'National Front'), and against a coalition of right-wing, Lebanese nationalist, overwhelmingly Christian militias and forces (the 'Lebanese Front'). This group of young idealists were crushed by the sectarian struggle for power in Lebanon, and the films find their circuitous method to treat the effects of defeat. In a series of oblique first person articulations that can't be anything but political, Soueid has the opposite struggle: how to insert the personal, subjective, jaundiced view into the scene, of one who is in effect 'a loser' of the war, of the struggle and of his not-inconsiderable ideals. How, in a word, can he articulate the personal experience of this devastating political reality?[31]

I will refer here to the third film in this series, *Civil War*. The first half-hour of *Civil War* is a speculative search for a character called Mohamed, beginning with a voiceover that tells us 'He was called Mohamed. I'm also called Mohamed. There are too many Mohamed's in this country.' If one watches this film without reading about it beforehand, it is unclear for the first half-hour who, precisely, this film is about. It appears to be about Mohamed, which would be expected from a first person film by a film-maker named Mohamed, except that he interviews several people who speak about Mohamed in the third person, past tense, as if he is not only absent, but perhaps no longer with us. So at once, and from the very beginning of the quest, the film-maker ties his destiny and his subjectivity to the masses of Mohameds who, like him, suffered terrible and even unspeakable losses in the none-too-distant past. The film both is and is not about himself. And indeed, even if the film were just about the film-maker, Mohamed Soueid, the inference would be that some part of him had died during the war and that it would not be inappropriate to speak about at least some significant part of himself in the third person, past tense.

It turns out that at least one of the Mohameds in the text is Mohamed Doaybess, a film line-producer who disappeared mysteriously in the year 2000, only to have been found on the rooftop of a nine-storey building, his body so utterly decomposed that he could only be identified by his teeth. Doaybess had worked with some of Lebanon's most well-known film-makers in the 1970s and 80s. In the minuscule film world of Lebanon, he was apparently quite a figure. This second Mohamed stands in not only as a clear surrogate for the evacuated soul of the film-maker,

but for the decomposing landscape of a city, once the 'Paris of the Middle East', now only identifiable by the bombed out structures that litter the skyline like so many rotten teeth.

This series, like other first person films from the region, emerges out of the ruins of the war, like a return gaze of a revenant that has been photographed practically to death. As previously mentioned, the Middle East generally is not a hotbed of first person film-making. The places where it seems to take hold are all zones of over-mediation due to violent conflict (war, occupation). The impulse to represent, to be true to one's own perceptions, to admit only for one's own distortions and flights of fancy, rather than those imposed by a relentless and rapacious media, seems a more than reasonable response. What is impressive, however, is the inventiveness and free acknowledgment of the shifting ground of the self that arises, certainly in the case of Mohamed Soueid's work, out of the ruins of the political, but also clearly constituted by the political. His work would make no sense understood otherwise and it would be the height of absurdity to claim that the work was nothing other than the effects of post-political neo-liberal discourses of the individual. I chose this film-maker's work to end on to allow for the full resonance of the claim I want to make, which is that the first person filmic modality, while surely, at times and in certain contexts, prone to the temptations of individualism and particularism, does not necessarily abandon the political potential of documentary as a form, but rather can be a radically destabilising force in and of itself. At times it can instantiate the integration and interpenetration of the particular and the universal, the subjective as intersubjective, intervening in the distribution of the sensible in unsettling ways, and thus, as we see in the work of Mohamed Soueid, can go some way to enact a politics in what appeared in my formulation at the start of this chapter as the post-revolutionary era. Now, as I conclude, a new popular revolutionary potential has begun to express itself across North Africa and the Levant that may well set the terms for a redistribution of what can be sensed politically for all of us. Where and how first person film will find its expression there is as yet to be seen, but it is clear to me that it may well have a place in this new revolutionary era.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1. Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: BFI, 2007), p. 242. It is important to note here that this claim may have little currency in places like the Arabic-speaking countries of the Levant, where first person film has been thought to have emerged much more as a response to trauma and to what could be called 'a world coming undone', such as in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War, or the first and second *Intifadas* in Palestine, rather than in some newly found (or worse, borrowed) identity politics.

2. Of course, this is not the first or only time the left could be said to be bedeviled by sectarianism, the difference here being that the various groups did not even share a commitment to revolutionary struggle, and the danger was, and remains, that what was once a radical revolutionary platform can too quickly transform into a liberal reformist one where moderate legal change within the existing power structures could easily become the limit of the claims.

3. I refer, of course, to the famous *October* symposium, 'The Identity in Question', held on 16 November 1991, the proceedings of which were published as a special issue (*October* no. 61, Summer 1992). Participants of the symposium included John Rajchman, Joan Scott, Cornel West, Chantal Mouffe, Homi Bhabha, Jacques Rancière, Judith Butler (though her contribution was not included in the printed version), Andreas Huyssen, Ernesto Laclau, Stanley Aronowitz and E. E. Smith.

4. Ernesto Laclau, 'Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity', *October* no. 61, Summer 1992, p. 85.

5. Chantal Mouffe, 'Citizenship and Political Identity', *October* no. 61, Summer 1992, pp. 28–32.

6. Stanley Aronowitz, 'Reflections on Identity', *October* no. 61, Summer 1992, p. 102.

7. Laclau, 'Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity', p. 87.

8. Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower, 2009).

9. I write about several such films in my book *First Person Jewish* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), including Jan Oxenberg's *Thank you and Goodnight* (1991), Gregg Bordowitz's *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993) and Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2004).

10. Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, p. 191.

11. In the film, the film-maker and some of the others with whom he was held hostage (a German and two Israelis) go back to the site of their abduction to work through their trauma. As Mark and his German fellow abductee confront two of their former kidnappers (who had initiated contact not long after Mark's repatriation) with stories of personal distress, essentially wrangling an apology out of the now repentant former

guerrilleros, they evoke the discourse of individual human rights, arguing that there was a gross contradiction between the guerrilleros' fight for freedom and depriving these individuals of theirs. The film itself attempts to return the hegemonic power relations back to their global order, with the Europeans and Israelis taking ther 'rightful' place as moral arbiters while holding all of the economic (not to mention cultural) power in their hands. At the same time it neatly transforms characters from former colonial and/or perpetrator cultures, infamous for their human rights infringements, into the victims at the hands of their brutal, inhumane hosts.

12. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2008 [2000]), p. 139.

13. Ibid., p. 141.

14. Ibid., p. 139.

15. A cursory list of such film-making would range from the films of Jonas Mekas, Michael Moore, Nick Broomfield, Alan Berliner, Ross McElwee or the later Agnès Varda, to personal films that specifically ally themselves with identity politics such as Joyce Chopra and Claudia Weill's *Joyce at 34* (1972, USA), Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989, USA) or Gregg Bordowitz's *Fast Trip, Long Drop*.

16. Think only of Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2001, France).

17. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010).

18. It has also been suggested that 'self films' emerged out of the Japanese tradition of '*shishosetsu*' ('I-novel' or 'private novel'), a modern literary form which is premised upon the belief that realism must be 'founded upon authenticated personal experience'. (Aaron Gerow, '*Shishosetsu*', 1997, http://www.yidff.jp/97/cat107/97c108-2-e.html. Accessed 30 October 2012.) I want to thank Seio Nakajima for directing me towards this connection.

19. He says this specifically to contrast these films with some of the hard-hitting agitational films that were being made at the time, such as the well-known *Minamata: The Victims and their World* (Tsuchimoto Noriaki, 1972, Japan), which directly takes the corporate giant Chisso to account for polluting the waters with methyl mercury, not only making it impossible for the local fishing economy to continue, but also creating horrific long-term health problems for the local population. And also, of course, the films of Ogawa Shinsuke, about the youth movement (*Sea of Youth*, 1966, and *The Oppressed Students*, 1967), or his *Sanrizuka* series (1971–77) detailing the violent struggles of a population against forced relocation by the government in order to build Narita Airport. See Abé Mark Nornes's fascinating study (*Forest of Pressure: Ogawa Shinsuke*

and Postwar Japanese Documentary [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007]) for more on this topic.

20. In an interview with Hara Kazuo during the 2009 Sheffield Film Festival, the interviewer John Berra, begins thus: 'Although the Japanese director Kazuo Hara has insisted that he is anything but a political film-maker, his 1974 documentary *Extreme Private Eros* (*Gokushiteki erosu: Renka*, 1974, Japan) remains a fascinating snapshot of Japanese society at a time of transition.' I am in agreement with this statement, though I think it does not go far enough.

21. Remember, this documentary came out two years before Nagisa Oshima's then controversially explicit *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976, Japan). Hara notes in his book *Camera Obstrusa* that it was no simple thing to shoot that scene – he feared his back would go out! Hara Kazuo, *Camera Obtrusa: The Action Documentaries of Hara Kazuo*, trans. Pat Noonan and Takuo Yasouda (New York: Kaya Press, 2009 [1987]), p. 106.

22. John Berra, '"Extreme Private Eros": Interview with Kazuo Hara', *Electric Sheep*, 2010, http://www.electricsheep magazine.co.uk/features/2010/01/10/extreme-private-eros-interview-with-kazuo-hara/. Accessed 24 November 2010.

23. Neither should we imagine the characters in the film as somehow standing outside of their social context, two deviants (or one deviant and one obsessive) who represent no one but themselves. Hara Kazuo (in Berra, 'Extreme Private Eros') tells us that he believes Miyuki 'was very representative of Japanese women at that time, especially those who were involved in student activities. But she had more charisma than other women, she was stranger, you could not say she was "normal", although she does represent a time of change for Japanese women.' And although he doesn't say as much explicitly in that one interview, it is fair to suspect that the same goes for him.

24. John Corner, 'Documentary and the Political', *Studies in Documentary Film* vol. 3 no. 2, November 2009, p. 114.

25. Steve Neale, 'Questions of Genre', *Screen* vol. 31 no. 1, Spring 1990, p. 57.

26. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991).

27. Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 241. I discuss Nancy's relevance to conceptualising the subject-in-relation in more depth in the introduction to *Cinema of Me: Self, Subjectivity in First Person Documentary Film* (London: Wallflower, 2012).

28. I am indebted to Rasha Salti, not only for introducing me to Mohamed Soueid's work, but also for her invaluable

analysis of the emergence of first person film in the Levant, which has informed much of the reading to follow.

29. The brigade was actually dismantled after the withdrawal of the PLO from Lebanon in 1982, but the films concern themselves with the time period commencing after the wars' end in 1991.

30. For a brilliantly evocative exploration of this theme see Rasha Salti, *Beirut Bereft* (Sharjah, UAW: Sharjah Biennal, 2009).

31. Another extraordinary example of a first person film that struggles to assert a personal perspective as distinct from overdetermined political identifications is Raed Andoni's *Fix Me* (2009, Palestine/France).