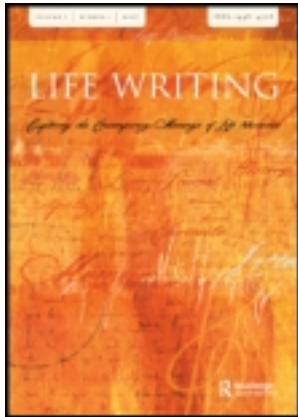


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Reading for Excess: Relational Autobiography, Affect and Popular Culture in *Tarnation*

Anna Poletti

In this article I will examine a limit point in current methods of reading in autobiography studies, using Jonathan Caouette's 2003 autobiographical film *Tarnation* as a case study. Reading a powerful and deeply ambiguous key scene from the film, I investigate the limits of a narrative-based approach to multi-modal auto/biographical texts. Drawing on contemporary documentary studies, affect and autobiography theory, I propose that the rise of autobiographical acts which use multiple media presents autobiography scholars with the opportunity to diversify our methods of reading to include attention to the communication and representation of the historical, social and semiotic conditions of identity and selfhood which exceed narrative representation. I examine Caouette's use of collage to bring together home-made footage and footage from popular culture as telling a relational narrative: the story of the video camera, and the opportunities it provides to make film and television texts in the home as a technology of the self which influenced Jonathan's development as deeply as his familial relations.

Keywords autobiography; affect; *Tarnation*; home movies; popular culture

If excess tends to be that which is beyond narrative in fiction films, excess in documentary is that which stands beyond the reach of both narrative and exposition. Narrative is like a black hole, drawing everything that comes within its ambit inward, organizing everything from décor to clothing to dialogue and action to serve a story. [...] Excess is that which escapes the grasp of narrative and exposition. It stands outside the web of significance spun to capture it (Nichols 142)

In this article I examine a limit point in current methods of reading in autobiography studies, using Jonathan Caouette's 2003 autobiographical film *Tarnation* as a case study. Reading a powerful and deeply ambiguous key scene

from the film, I investigate the limits of a narrative-based approach to reading non-fiction, self-representational multi-modal texts. I use this somewhat long-winded description for the film in order to avoid the term ‘life narrative’ which is, I will argue, a term which normalises the scholarly habit of reading story and character in autobiography and in doing so often closes down what Bill Nichols describes as the ‘double system’ of documentary: ‘its potential for ambivalence paradox, parody and deception (and self-deception)’ (138). As Nichols suggests in the quote above, reading for narrative is a practice which often closes down elements of a text that threaten or problematise the story. In autobiography studies, such an approach is not focused solely on reading for coherent narratives; reading for incoherent or dispersed narratives can also elide excess in order to map the chaos of the story or ‘non-story’. The practice of reading for narrative (what is the story here? Who tells it and how?) has been an appropriate method while autobiography studies remained focused on reading written texts. However, with the proliferation of autobiographical texts in other media (Smith and Watson ‘Visual-Verbal-Virtual’), it is vitally important that autobiography scholars adapt their methods and reading strategies, especially given the significant contribution autobiography scholars can make to the reading of autobiographical texts currently the focus of work in cinema, media and cultural studies (see for example Lundby; Renov).

Drawing on contemporary documentary studies, affect theory and autobiography theory, I propose that the rise of autobiographical acts which use multiple media require autobiography scholars to expand our methods of reading to include attention to the communication and representation of the historical, social and semiotic conditions of identity and selfhood which exceed narrative representation. As the truism of ‘everyone having a story to tell’ permeates popular culture in the West, autobiography scholarship must remain attentive to the excesses that accompany uses of ‘story’ and its telling. This is particularly relevant when reading autobiographical acts produced outside the professional publishing industry, in online environments, in community arts and development projects, in subcultures, in the DIY spirit, in activist communities, and in the street. In these cases ‘the story’ may be the driving purpose for the text’s construction, but the materials drawn on to tell the story may often produce excess which troubles or complicates a narrative-focused reading, and which exceed the intention behind the narrative’s construction.

Tarnation is a relational life narrative which, like the narratives discussed by Paul John Eakin and Nancy K. Miller, uses the parent–child relation to frame the telling of the story of Jonathan’s mother and her mental illness. It powerfully demonstrates Eakin and Miller’s suggestion that autobiography may be the genre par excellence of placing the self in relation to the other, of seeking to lay out (if not lay bare) the ways in which one’s identity is inextricably bound to the life and self of a significant other. The film has been praised for its treatment of family and intergenerational ties (Harris; Orgeron and Orgeron; Rich). However, as with many relational life narratives, some commentators have expressed concern about the ethics of using autobiography as a means of pursuing truth about one’s

family and the knots that tie its individuals to each other (Hall). The commentators and critics, however, are united in lauding the innovative collaged form of *Tarnation*, which deploys home movie and video footage, family photos, inter-titles, answering machine tapes, sound recordings and contemporary footage shot on digital video in an autobiographical collage intercut with excerpts from television and film. Reading this formal strategy closely, we can see that Caouette's use of collage to bring together home-made footage and footage from popular culture is telling another relational narrative: the story of the video camera, and the opportunities it provides to make film and television inspired texts in the home. Caouette's film depicts the video camera as a technology of the self that influenced Jonathan's development as deeply as his familial relations.

In what follows, I examine how Caouette's collage technique destabilises long-held distinctions between archival footage associated with the intimate private sphere and the public, performative fictional texts of popular culture. I will also consider examine how the relational narrative between self and camera, and self and popular culture, raises challenges to reading practices that literalise affect in the service of a narrative-focused reading.

Such an analysis is not without precedent. In their 2001 article 'The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography', Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson present a series of questions regarding the status of life narrative in contexts where younger autobiographers are deploying a range of material and textual remnants from the past, asking 'how do we describe the difference between selected quotation of one's past moments in such memorabilia as objects and diaries, and the performance of one's past as memory work?' (4). A key provocation of Smith and Watson's article is to question 'to what extent are literary, or narratively-based, theories of autobiography useful for inquiring into self-reflexive narratives that interweave presentations of self across multiple media ...?' (13). I take up this question by discussing how we might read a scene of performative home-video testimony in *Tarnation*. In doing so I propose a method that can be used to unpack the meanings and affects that stem from the excess generated by materiality in texts such as Caouette's, but also in mediums such as zines (Poletti), graffiti (Heddon) and contemporary art (Smith and Watson; Lehman). Central to this analysis is the argument that archival documents sutured into an autobiographical text may communicate affective intensities rather than discernable, locatable emotional events that fit seamlessly into the overall narrative structure into which they are placed (Berlant 'Thinking' 4). *Tarnation* demonstrates that the introduction of archival moving image footage can destabilise meaning as much as it can provide evidence or memory work supporting a narrative's themes and subject. My reading will focus on examining how the materiality of video footage produces an excess within the relational narrative of *Tarnation* which points to the potential of the video camera to function as a means of experimenting with the tropes of popular culture for the structuring of affect and the exploration of identity. My argument is that

Tarnation tells two relational stories, only one of which (the familial) is the focus of the film's narrative.

Smith and Watson touch on the complexities of reading home-movie and video footage in their discussion of the moving-image works that accompanied the first exhibition, as part of the 1999 Turner Prize, of Tracey Emin's now infamous work 'My Bed'. They suggest that the collection of video works—including one which appears to be home movie footage—form part of Emin's use of multiple mediums in a project of 'self-making as self-chronicling' which is 'an avant-garde gesture, expanding the modes of self-representation at a shifting matrix of publicly performed visuality and textuality' (4). *Tarnation* presents a more recent and explicit investigation of this matrix; 'self-making as self-chronicling' is an apt description of Caouette's use of film and video cameras since childhood to record and experiment with selfhood. For Caouette, the video camera is a technology of self (Gilmore 19), which facilitates the exploration of the representational practices associated with popular screen culture and the structures of feeling associated with it.

Tarnation was first screened at the Mix Festival, a lesbian and gay experimental film and video event in New York City, where Caouette entered a two-hour version of the film. The film was picked up by executive producers Gus Van Sant and John Cameron Mitchell, and edited down to 88 minutes (Sanchez). It went on to play at a number of high-profile film festivals, including Cannes and Sundance, and received an international distribution deal. The much-cited statistic about *Tarnation* that accompanied its international release was that it was made for \$218 American dollars (Rich). Assembled entirely on the consumer-grade editing software iMovie, a standard software program included with Apple computers, the most expensive element of the film occurred in post-production, where securing the rights to use the many songs that make up its soundtrack is reported to have cost around a quarter of a million dollars (Rich).

That one of the few home-made feature films to be released internationally is an autobiographical film is cause for some note for autobiography scholars, and while *Tarnation* has received some comment in cinema and documentary studies—mostly in terms of how it expands upon and continues the tradition of personal documentary filmmaking as engaged in by practitioners such as Ross McElwee (Orgeron and Orgeron; Scott; Renov 'First person')—the film poses a range of challenges for autobiography studies as we formulate ways of thinking about the continuing diversification of mediums used for autobiographical acts, and the increasingly complex, intertextual and relational forms such narratives are taking (see Smith and Watson 'Visual-Verbal-Virtual'). The questions raised by these texts include: what happens to the autobiographical pact in multi-modal life narratives? How do readers decode the truth claims of a text which amalgamates the archival documents resulting from 'self-making as self-chronicling' with material taken from the television and movie screen? Given that writing is but one of a myriad of ways individuals can now undertake self-

chronicling, we might well expect a rise in the use of home movie footage in biographical and autobiographical texts (see Orgeron and Orgeron).

Elizabeth Bruss predicted such a shift when she outlined the impact of film and video on the dominance of life *writing* in her contribution to James Olney's anthology of criticism on autobiography in 1980. She observed that autobiography as a genre was in the process of disappearing as 'film and video ... come to replace writing as our chief means of recording, informing and entertaining' (296). Bruss' prognosis for the practice of autobiography (as we knew it then) was not good: she argued that there could be no cinematic equivalent to literary autobiography and thus the genre was destined to fade away with the 'change of the total environment' in which it exists (296). However several critics have since pointed out that Bruss overstated the predicament. Documentary theorist Michael Renov observes 'that autobiography, far from being an endangered species, shows new signs of life' in the work of film and video makers (Renov 'The Subject' 5), while Nadja Gernalzick observes that Bruss overlooked the textual equivalencies, such as subjective camera perspective, that exist between the two mediums (3).

The impact of technologies of the moving image on contemporary autobiographical practice has been addressed outside of autobiography studies and described in cinema studies as 'the new autobiography'. Most recently this term has been used by documentary theorist Michael Renov in an article titled 'The Subject in History', and earlier (in 1978) by P. Adams Sitney to describe the work of avant-garde film-makers. Renov defines the new autobiography through analogy with the essay writing of Montaigne and Roland Barthes, which 'couples a documentary impulse—an outward gaze upon the world—with an equally forceful reflex of self-interrogation' ('The Subject' 4). He characterises the moving-image autobiography as depicting subjectivity in flux, wherein the world and the subject are represented as 'mutually constitutive' and techniques which mix 'past and present modes through a first-person reimagining [...] blending expressive and descriptive elements' are deployed (5–6). Such a genre definition needs to be further examined through the close reading of examples of moving-image autobiographies, and while I agree with Sitney, Renov and Gernalzick that self-representational narrative akin to that found in written autobiography is possible, I would argue that the features and limits of that affinity require more investigation. In the case of *Tarnation*, and the work of artists such as Tracey Emin, and the video bloggers broadcasting on YouTube and other websites, the limits may be where audio, visual and material representation has the potential to produce insight into affective intensities rather than narratives (coherent or otherwise) of selfhood. In exploring this limit point, the reading strategies of autobiography studies need to be deployed in conjunction with affect theory and approaches from cinema studies. Such an interdisciplinary approach can address what Renov has observed is the largely under-theorised status of autobiographical films ('First person' 39), and continue the examination of relational autobiography inaugurated by Miller and Eakin. However, it also raises significant

questions about reading and affect that challenge the narrative-focused approach to reading autobiography currently dominating the field.

Testimonial Narrative, Trauma and Performance

In the scene I am considering, we witness Jonathan performing the testimony of a battered wife, a woman who confesses to killing her husband after he assaulted and threatened to kill her. At the opening of the scene, Jonathan walks into frame and turns on the light. The scene is shot from a fixed perspective, with Jonathan facing the camera, his head and shoulders visible. After turning on the light, Jonathan turns to the camera and asks, in a lilting Southern accent, 'Am I on?' After receiving an affirmative gesture from an off-camera presence (whose existence is implied by the performance), Jonathan delivers the following monologue to the camera:

My name ... is Hilary Chapman Laura-Lou Garia [sic].
 This is like a, um, testimony, isn't it?
 Jimmy says when I wear too much make-up it makes me look like a whore so, sorry.
 Hi ... oh, I told you my name. Um ... my testimony is about me and my little baby, Caroline? I've ... I've been through hell.
 I'm kinda nervous here in front of you all.
 What a year you know, six-1969. Modern-day housewife, me. Um, it all started when, um, Jimmy was coming home late at night. Getting into, um, alcohol and I was pregnant with Caroline, and still gaining the pounds. She is only... she's two years old now, healthy baby. Um
 She ... he used to beat me. When he'd come home, drunk at night.
 He used to beat me. And ... he ... used to, um, kick me in the stomach while I was pregnant ... and, um, tie me up. When he was smoking that dope, that's what got to him ... to the brain there ... and, um ... [Jonathan appears to be crying]
 I can't stop.
 This is really, um, hard for me.
 One night he got out the gun, I was tied up on the bed. And he came and pointed it to my head. He said, 'I'll kill you, bitch. I'll kill you.'
 It was the other way around. I got out the gun one night, blew his ass away.

The film then cuts to a collage of photographic images of clouds, an anonymous disfigured face and more home-video footage of a young Jonathan lying in bed. The soundtrack to this sequence is non-diegetic; voices whisper 'wake up' and they are interdispersed with a single note on a triangle or bell.

In contemplating this scene of testimony, we may first want to attempt to create a framework which can explain how it is that an eleven-year-old boy comes to dress up as a woman whose husband calls her a whore when she wears too much make-up, a woman who is the proud mother of a two-year-old girl. In creating this framework we might come to interpret this performance as seeking to bear witness to Jonathan's own abuse as a child in foster homes, where (he tells us in a

subtitled montage prior to this scene) he was tied up, beaten and sexually abused. In this reading, the performance of testimony may be viewed as an attempt to communicate a traumatic event—the character of the abused woman is the necessary fiction required for the child to express the shock and sadness at his own experience of abuse, and to test out his desire for revenge¹. Here the camera is used for what Sandra Hall, in her review of the film, calls ‘therapeutic’ purposes (2005), and this narrative-focused interpretive frame seeks to understand the scene in terms of it how builds on what has come before; all attention is paid to the spoken content of the footage and the physical elements of Jonathan’s performance which support it, in order to advance an interpretation of the scene’s relationship with and contribution to the (auto)biographical narrative of the film. Indeed this scene, described by Adrienne Harris as a ‘big set piece’ (9), is a touchstone for reviewers and academics discussing *Tarnation* (see Ebert; Farman; Hall; Harris; Rich; Sanchez; Shatkin), and is generally seen as central to the story of Caouette’s struggle to survive his family’s history and circumstance (see Hall; Harris; Rich; Renov ‘First-person’).

However, we can further unpack this scene by considering the role of the medium in informing the narrative-based approach. The largely unstated role of the materiality of home video in the narrative reading, and its potential to destabilise such a reading, demands close attention; this requires an analysis of the role of home-video footage in *Tarnation* and the specific connotative power of its materiality. In doing so, we must consider how the materiality of home video, and its particular connotative force, constitute a specific autobiographical act which historically situates the video camera as a technology of self-representation, and demonstrates how, for Caouette at least, it is a technology of self deeply situated in the narrative and representational tropes of popular culture. I will address these issues in the following two sections.

Home-made Moving Images, the Private Sphere and Indexicality

In examining the role of materiality in the narrative reading of the scene, we might begin by acknowledging the strong association between home-movie footage and privatised modes of viewing (Forgács 48–49; Simon 191–192). Roger Odin, in developing a method for reading the home movie as document, argues that in the ‘private’ mode of viewing, where home movies are viewed by the family that is their subject, ‘Home-movie images function less as representations than as *index* inviting the family to *return to a past already lived*’ (259). Home movies, like amateur photography, are commonly held to have this indexical relationship to what they depict. The indexical relationship home-movie footage has to past selves—its power as an archival text sutured into the larger body of the film in a text like *Tarnation*—is partly a result of its connotative relationship to the private sphere as both site of production and viewing. This power also stems from the central role the indexical function of the photographic image has

played in documentary as a non-fiction cinematic genre (Renov 'First-person' 41). As Bill Nichols has argued:

... the guarantee of authenticity we may feel in the presence of the documentary image is a guarantee born of our own complicity with the claims of the text. The image and the text—its conventions and techniques—combine to provide the basis for our inference or assumption that the photographic image's stickiness [indexicality] has within it the stuff of history. (151)

In regards to home-made moving-image footage, we commonly read it as inherently intimate, as a text produced for a familial and familiar audience, and this strengthens an assumption of its indexicality; the 'stickiness' of the image is to the intimate unguarded space of the private sphere. These discourses inform a reading of the scene in question that focuses on the content of the performance and on the narrative of trauma presented by a child who we have just been told is a victim of abuse. Such an approach is evident in Orgeron and Orgeron's suggestion that the appeal of documentary films which make use of home-movie and video footage 'partly hinges on their promise of a glimpse beyond the surface, an invitation to see the unlovely element typically concealed by the curtain drawn on private lives' (50–51), and in the responses to *Tarnation* in popular and academic spheres.

Yet, writing from within documentary studies, Renov has recently offered a clear summation of how the practices of autobiographical filmmaking 'so blatantly problematizes film's capacity to deliver the past as narrative of continuity and historical understanding' ('First person' 43). The continuing dominance of the assumption of the indexical function of moving-image technology (whether understood as a trace or a more solid historical truth), and the truth status accorded home-made footage significantly limits our capacity to respond to autobiographical films with the complexity and nuance commonly brought to multi-modal life-writing texts such as graphic memoirs (see for example Watson's reading of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*).

The limitation of the narrative-focused interpretive regime, which relies on reading the materiality of the home-made footage as establishing an indexical relationship to the private sphere and the 'home truths' located there, is that it denies the excess produced by the archival footage. The use of home-made footage in *Tarnation* evidences something other than, in addition to, a confirmation of Caouette's traumatic childhood: it provides insight into the moving-image camera as a historically located technology of self which, for its users, opens up a creative relational space of play and experimentation with the subjectivities and narrative modes of popular culture. Home-movie theorist Patricia Zimmermann argues that home-movie footage has a dual role as 'unexplored evidence for film history', on the one hand presenting marginalised histories on film, and on the other hand by providing material for the historical study of technologies of the moving image (3–4). As an example of the latter, the unique visual and aural characteristics of the video footage in *Tarnation* functions in two ways. Firstly, it situates Caouette in a specific time period in relation to

the development of consumer audio-visual technology; the grainy video footage (shot on tape), and synchronised sound recorded through an in-camera microphone situate Caouette's autobiography as being enabled, some may even say occasioned, by particular developments in consumer audio-visual technologies. In this reading, the materiality of the footage—that is, almost everything *but* what the child is performing—situates Caouette within a continuum of home-movie and amateur film-making relative to developments in the technology and its accessibility. Moreover, this footage provides a compelling example of *how* these technologies were being deployed for the purposes of performance and experimentation in the households in which they were introduced. Caouette's footage reveals details for an historical analysis of amateur adoption of technologies and their use. Adrienne Harris makes such a historical reading when she reads the presence of the video camera in the everyday life of Caouette and his family as evidence that:

For all of them the camera seems to be a crucial part of the family's creation of selves and family myth. Jonathan and his family seem almost to live on camera. (3)

As a psychoanalyst, Harris's reading is one focused on interpreting *Tarnation* as 'clinical artifact' (12). However, her observation also holds for an interpretation of *Tarnation* as a cultural one. In this sense, *Tarnation* can be read as a life narrative of technology and culture, although such a reading still raises the question of *how* to interpret the role of the camera as a technology of self in the historical period documented by Caouette. How was the camera being used? What conventions were structuring its use, or being restructured by its use?²

In their examination of a range of recent documentary films, including *Tarnation*, which make use of archival home-video footage, Orgeron and Orgeron track the distinct shift in the use of the camera in the family home arguing that:

Where home *movies* have been characterized as providing highly selective, idealized glimpses of family life [...] home *videos* [...] provide an archival representation that goes beyond the iconography of picture-perfect birthday parties and Christmas mornings. (48)

This distinction clarifies a shift in the way moving-image cameras have been used in the domestic sphere, and like James M. Moran, Orgeron and Orgeron are careful to acknowledge the material and narrative differences made possible by film and video cameras in the home mode (see Moran 33–64). This difference largely centres on film being used for formal occasions (due to its short reels and cost), while video was seen to 'open up' the home environment to more continuous and spontaneous engagement with the camera (Orgeron and Orgeron 48). This 'openness', Orgeron and Orgeron suggest, meant that 'Though no less performative, no less the product of authorial invention and intention, the home videos [...] expose the family in various states of decay and dissolution, capturing the antithesis of domestic harmony' (48). The precise nature of this 'exposure'

and 'capture' is key to the question of reading Jonathon's performance of testimony and *Tarnation*. The word 'exposure' is telling, as it demonstrates the continued association that exists between the home-made text, as a document of the private sphere, and the indexical function of the moving image. Such a reading is warned against by Moran, who argues that we must acknowledge the ambiguity and theatricality made possible by the medium of video and which, upon close scrutiny, 'reveal[s] the tape as an artificial construct defamiliarizing video's so-called reality effect' (42)³. Indeed, a performance such as Jonathan's seems intent on playing with the reality effect of the camera; modelling all the genre traits of melodrama which communicate a 'true story' of victimisation.

In 1978, film theorist P. Adams Sitney also warned of the allure of the index in autobiographical film, reminding us that: '[i]ndexicality is a problematic assumption in cinema; yet even though films constantly unveil the ontological ambiguity of their images, the testimony of the index remains a continual seduction' (219). Jonathan's youthful performances, littered throughout *Tarnation*, considerably problematise the indexical lure of the home-made image, and a reading of such footage as exposing, through narrative, 'home truths'. Caouette's footage documents his childhood experiments with the potential of the camera, but the precise index of this footage—as the child dramatises, emotes and engages directly with the device—is almost impossible to pin down.

This ambiguity is evident in reviewer's responses to the film. In her review, respected film theorist and reviewer B. Ruby Rich describes the scene as follows:

Caouette began *Tarnation* at the age of 11. No, that's not quite right. He began consciously performing for the camera at that age. No longer a mere participant in home movies, he stands alone in front of the camera speaking in a first-person address. But he's not exactly himself, as if we know what that is. Instead, in drag and distraught, the young Jonathan offers up an impersonation, presenting a 'testimony' about her child Caroline and her husband who drinks and does dope and beats her, fidgeting with 'her' hair, weeping. Who is this? Whether his mother or a neighbour or a fantasy of a movie star, she's a show-stopper. (NP)

Similarly, Harris finds pinpointing the precise intention behind Jonathan's performance difficult. In offering a psychoanalytic reading of the scene that posits Jonathan as performing his mother's trauma and through this performance becoming her 'caretaker' (9), Harris begins by stating:

He acts anxious and overwhelmed, speaking in the cadence of his mother, or perhaps retelling stories about his mother told by his grandmother, or speech styles absorbed from TV dramas or soap operas. We cannot really fully know the historical anchor of the ideas that swirl through this monologue, but it is a story of a 'young girl' named Hilary... (9)

As evidenced by these commentaries, the undeniable performative nature of the footage—its intertextual relationship with popular culture texts, and television in particular—exposes the ontological instability inherent in the moving image,

yet a narrative-based approach to the film will seek to cover over this mutability by focussing on the trauma conveyed, without considering the inter-relationship of the medium (the use of the camera, and the power it gives Caouette to watch himself on a screen) and the meanings produced. The impact of this scene lies partly in Caouette's eerie performance, but also in the ontological vertigo it produces in the viewer; its impact is largely the result of the encounter with uncertainty it generates. As the scene unfolds, the audience struggles to identify frames of reference in which to place it, and we seek to contain its meaning by reaching for the cultural scripts which will limit and anchor its meaning. The status of the scene as home-made introduces the discourse of indexicality and privacy outlined above, coupled with the 'to camera' performance reminiscent of the video diary now ubiquitous in reality television, guide us towards reading the scene as a testimonial artefact of trauma taken and 'cited' from the Caouette family archive.

However, it is precisely the destabilising effect and multiplicity of meanings suggested by it that makes this scene an example of the 'secondary revisioning'—where experience and memory are (re)transcribed—which Renov identifies in the work of other videographers (Renov 'The Subject' 6). Specifically, the inclusion of this scene can be read as an experiment by Caouette which seeks to investigate and problematize the indexical function of footage shot in the home (indeed, to question how it is that the documents produced through 'self-making as self-chronicling' can be read), rather than an incident evoking such indexicality. The film itself supplies ample material to suggest that the performance of testimony is more aptly described as a technology of self, drawing on televisual discourses of self-representation and the presence of the camera, than as solely a testimonial narrative of child abuse. In particular, a montage which comes shortly after this scene which uses a three-way split screen to place archival footage alongside television and film excerpts demonstrate that Caouette is interested in how the personal and the popular intersect.

We may also consider Caouette's contextualisation of the scene provided in the director's commentary, which suggests such performances were conducted for and with members of his family regularly. This contextual information requires us to acknowledge that the content of the scene in question—its meaning at the moment of its construction (that is, the intention of the eleven-year-old child conducting the improvisation), and the meanings it was capable of producing *prior* to its suturing into the relational autobiographical narrative of *Tarnation*—are unknowable. A narrative-focussed reading of the film relies significantly on closing down much of the ambiguity produced by Caouette's collage technique, and refuses the narrative about popular culture and selfhood *Tarnation* seeks to tell. Caouette makes use of his childhood performance for the camera as an object that can be cited (alongside many others in the film), but more than this, the inclusion of the performance footage works to destabilise the indexical power of the home-made moving image by bringing it into a relationship with mass media and popular culture and the models of selfhood which populate it. Through collage, there is a deliberate attempt to dissolve the boundaries

between the documents of popular culture and the moving images of the family archive.

This intertextual relationship between the archival and the popular provokes a re-consideration of interpretive paradigms that seek to maintain (and through such maintenance, police) the distinctions between the autobiographical and the popular, the documentary and the fictional. However, such a provocation should not be seen as inevitably leading to a relativist melange commonly associated with postmodern culture; it instead demands dynamic and sensitive reading strategies which can respond to Caouette's claim for recognition of the powerful resource popular culture presents for self-representation. Caouette is insisting on the capacity to make truth claims about lived experience, yet he does not want to rely solely on the truth-telling power of indexical home-made footage, or other documents of the private sphere, to do so. The use of popular culture and the camera as technology of self are central to the autobiographical project of *Tarnation*, where 'evidence' of experience and affective intensities are drawn from sources far beyond the domestic and the personal.

In addition to the discourses of indexicality and privacy structuring the reading of the testimony scene, underscoring an interpretation of *Tarnation* which seeks to close down its destabilising use of home-made and popular footage is a tendency, identified by Lauren Berlant, to understand 'the communication of affect and emotion' as 'mimetic and literalizing' ('Thinking' 4). Berlant's argument that 'to impute a mirroring relation between affective activity and emotional states underdescribes the incoherence of subjects—their capacity to hold irreconcilable attachments and investments, the complexity of motives for disavowal and defense' ('Thinking' 4) suggests a wholly different reading of the scene, one in which we witness Jonathan's experiments with structuring affect using the narrative devices and subjectivities available via television, rather than the footage being read as a document from the past whose meaning is solely and firmly located in its verbal content. To an extent, then, I am in agreement with Harris, who states that 'This scene, so filled with the tropes and conventions of melodrama, TV serials and soap-operas, shows just how palpable culture as constitutive of identity can be' (9). However, I disagree with her conclusion that a constitutive relationship with popular culture is solely the domain of 'fragile psyches'. Rather, following Berlant, I argue that the use of popular culture as a source of models for the structuring of affect is a common feature of American citizenship ('Introduction') and *Tarnation* is a compelling example of this relation.

Living, Making and Watching Movies

Recognising how the placement of Jonathan's testimony within the film disrupts our traditional reading practices of home-made moving images, we can turn to a consideration of it as a relational autobiography about popular culture. As well as the scene I have discussed here, *Tarnation* includes home-video footage from a

musical version of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* directed by Caouette and a friend in high school, as well as several scenes taken from super-8 horror movies Caouette made with his friends and family. There is also an unrelenting soundtrack of popular music accompanying the film (the importance of which is reiterated in the director's commentary), as well as footage taken from news reports, screenshots of Google, television programmes, films and dozens more performances to camera made by Caouette as a child and teenager which draw heavily on the visual and physical gestures of music video, popular and art-house cinema.

In the director's commentary, available on the DVD release of the film, Caouette contextualises the performance in the 'Laura-Lou' scene as one of many performances he regularly made in the hallway of his grandparent's home. He lists three elements that inspired the performance: the first is his mother's second marriage to a man who abused her 'physically and psychologically'; the second, is a double episode of the late 1970s television programme *The Bionic Woman* (1976–1978) titled 'Deadly Ringer' in which a doppelganger of the lead character (played by Lindsay Wagner) imprisons her and steals her identity; the third inspiration for the scene was having watched, the very evening of the performance, a production of Ntozake Shange's *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* broadcast on the PBS series *American Playhouse*. This commentary by Caouette gives some support for the narrative approach to the scene (see, for example, Harris 9); however, the specificity and centrality of television texts in the description is emblematic of the intertextuality that defines *Tarnation*, and the importance of memory and knowledge of popular culture in the formation of Caouette's subjectivity both as a child and as a film-maker. In his commentary, Caouette explains the scene as being coaxed by television—its modes of expression, models of subjectivity and timbres of feeling—while the presence of the camera occasions it. Jonathan's performance may be physically located in the private sphere, but it is seeking dialogue with issues and affects on a number of registers: with the personal past, *The Bionic Woman* and the moving text and performances of Ntozake Shange's play. In the contemporary moment of recording the director's commentary, Caouette is at pains to explain the intertextual links and their relevance, reinscribing the continuing importance of popular culture as a technology of self. Reading the commentary and the scene together, we can see that *Tarnation* is undeniably a narrative connected to Caouette's family history, but is also an experiment in subjectivity and expression powerfully connected with 'television mythology' (a term used by Caouette repeatedly in the director's commentary).

An additional level of intertextuality occurs in the distribution of this performance in *Tarnation*. Incorporated into a film produced in 2003, the testimony of Hilary Laura-Lou is brought into an intertextual relationship with reality television and its mode of the confessional monologue as a way of expressing 'true emotions' (Aslama and Pantti 168) and this returns us to Caouette's citational use of the footage. Editing the film in the early 2000s, Caouette is no doubt aware that his audience will read this scene, and indeed *Tarnation* as a whole, within a frame dominated by confessional television genres

and memoir. In his director's commentary he indicates his dislike for reality TV, and counters this with a need to see truth and 'real stories' in the cinema. Emphasising the distinction between reality TV and his use of home video and movie footage, Caouette refers to this scene as one of two 'true vérité' moments in the film.⁴ The truth claims of this film are complex, and as a 'cinema of [autobiographical] truth' *Tarnation* depicts with rare artistry and force the extent to which popular culture and autobiographical acts form a network of representational practices which, in conjunction with the technologies of moving-image recording and editing, can result in densely collaged, relational representations of identity. Caouette, like the cinema-vérité practitioners he seeks alignment with, proposes a new perspective from which to consider the truth-telling power of the moving-image camera and the subjectivities modeled in popular culture which new generations of autobiographers are using as tools for developing an understanding of life and living.

It is here the material specificity of Caouette's access to audio-visual recording equipment from a comparatively young age and his aspirations as a knowledgeable, committed and active audience for popular culture of all kinds (stretching from *The Bionic Woman* to the films of Paul Morrissey and Andy Warhol to cinema vérité) combine to produce a text like *Tarnation*. The continuous, insistent intercutting of the home-made with popular footage in the film produces a compelling depiction of the power of popular culture—particularly screen and popular music—to be appropriated into the everyday lives of its audiences and function as a technology of self. In this sense, *Tarnation* is as much about the formative and deep relation between Jonathan and popular culture as it is about his relationship with his mother. With the release of *Tarnation*, the extent to which autobiography in this century will be intertextually embedded in the discourses and practices of subjectivity offered up by popular culture is signalled. As Caouette's film demonstrates, genres such as art-house films, horror movies, popular music and syndicated children's television, in combination with the presence of the technology to produce low-fi versions of screen texts in the home, are being taken up as primary tools for the thinking about subjectivity and life history. While some steps have been made to begin to unpack the formations and impacts of this intertextuality (see, for example, Helms), a task that now faces autobiography scholars is to develop the interpretive and conceptual strategies to continue to be responsive and engaged close readers of such texts.

Notes

- [1] Harris proposes a slightly different reading, suggesting that Jonathan enacts and embodies his mother's trauma of mental illness and shock treatments in an attempt to bear witness to it (8–10).
- [2] The importance of considering the availability of technologies in the spread of life narrative practices is powerfully demonstrated in Lejeune's *On Diary*, which tracks

- the development of the calendar, the mass production of paper and writing implements as the necessary conditions for diary-keeping.
- [3] See also Rosalind Krauss's discussion of 'the aesthetics of narcissism' for how video creates specific models of self-reflection in early video art.
- [4] The other is an extended, and unedited, sequence of his mother singing to a small pumpkin at the end of the film; in the commentary on this scene, Caouette discusses cinema vérité in more detail.

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