EYE FOR I: VIDEO SELF-PORTRAITS

by Raymond Bellour

In Western cultural tradition, the term "self-portrait" immediately evokes painting. It is the special value of Michel Beaujour's *Miroirs d'encre* to have established the existence of the literary self-portrait (of which he has written a history and in which discovered a logic) parallel to, yet apart from, the pictorial model. Adopting a similar perspective, we can speak today of the video self-portrait without feeling obliged to refer to painting, even if this autonomy is relative in each case, as both video and painting converge in a larger context.

Autobiography, cinema: these are the terms that will allow us, through a kind of negative detour, to zero in on the historical emergence of the video self-portrait. The literary theorist Elizabeth Bruss has led the way in a definitive article that finds cinema lacking a tradition comparable to that of the literary autobiography. For this she gives three reasons, corresponding to three criteria that define the genre as such:

1. *The value of truth*, which charges the author to speak the truth, as it pertains to both the veracity of sources, and the sincerity of intentions. Cinema can little subscribe to this, torn as it is between the act of simply recording an event and that of re-telling it, between the staged truth of *mise en scène* and the truth directly registered by the camera, between the contradictory excesses of documentary and fiction. This is a problem unknown to language, which can never be, in and of itself, too much or too little "real," since it never enters into a direct relation with reality.

2. *The value of the act*, which recognizes authors as subjects responsible for behavior meant to illustrate their characters. Cinema has more trouble directly expressing this presence; the marks of expression employed for self-representation in the image tend to undermine the effects of authenticity and reality the subject wishes to convey.

3. *The value of identity*, which draws together in a single person the author, the narrator, and the protagonist. In precisely the place in the text where the "I" who speaks becomes
confused, as a matter of course, with the “I” being spoken about, there is in cinema an almost unbridgeable gap between the “I” who sees and the “I” who is seen. In cinema, the subject is either too present or too absent; subjectivity disappears before objectivity/the camera lens (in French, l’objectif, meaning both “objectivity” and “lens”).

Critics have reproached Bruss for the rigidity of her views, insisting as a counter-argument on various efforts, numerous since the sixties, that have allowed the cinema to express the “I,” and to open itself up to the intimate, the personal, the private, the subjective—in short, to the autobiographical.4 Passing from the extremes of experimental film to commercial production, these efforts link such diverse figures as Raymond Depardon and Maria Koleva, Boris Lehman and Jonas Mekas, Chantal Akerman and Orson Welles, Jim McBride and Joseph Morder, Chris Marker and Federico Fellini, Stan Brakhage and Jean Cocteau, Robert Frank and Hollis Frampton. Still, it is relatively easy to show, as Bruss has done to some extent, that the films of all these authors, however subjective and autobiographical they may be, only succeed as autobiography by, paradoxically, exposing the marks of the impossibility of autobiography, whose pact they cannot truly fulfill. It is only by virtue of this self-reflexivity that they enter, in their individual ways, into the arena Beaujour defines as the form and tradition of the literary self-portrait.

The essays of Montaigne are, of course, the founding, exemplary texts of the genre; in them, we see how the models of ancient rhetoric and their equivalents in religious thought are bent to the ends of personal expression. The entire rhetorical system of places and images, the dialectic of invention and memory forged since antiquity for the purpose of persuading others, undergoes a metamorphosis in Montaigne’s troubled search for himself.

The self-portrait is distinguished from autobiography by the absence of a story one is obliged to follow. Narration is subordinated in the former to a logic, a collage of elements ordered according to a series of rubrics, of thematic types. The self-portrait clings to the analogical, the metaphorical, the poetic, far more than to the narrative. Its coherence lies in a system of remembrances, afterthoughts, superimpositions, correspondences. It thus takes on the appearance of discontinuity, of anachronistic juxtaposition, of montage. Where autobiography closes in on the life it recounts, the self-portrait opens itself up to a limitless totality. The self-portraitist announces: “I’m not going to tell you what I’ve done, but I am
going to try to tell you who I am.” To this expression of an absence of self and a fundamental uncertainty about identity, nothing the author writes responds fully, yet everything responds a little. The self-portraitist passes without transition from a void of meaning to an excess, without a clear sense of direction or action.

The self-portrait is a work born of idleness, of the retreat. To writing as action, intervention, belief and dialogue, the self-portraitist opposes writing as inaction, digression, and monologue. The subject of the self-portrait is encyclopedic, grasping its identity through the optic of the world, and in particular of culture—of everything, in other words, that constitutes the individual. The subject becomes the hero of the book and of the book posed as an absolute in the quest for memory and the search for self. The book is thus at the same time a utopia, a body, and a tomb. Starting from the most personal quest possible, the author opens the self up to the impersonal, moving constantly from the particular to the general, with no other assurance or belief than those of the individual’s own movement.

Thus has the self-portrait developed as a proper and relatively stable form from Renaissance to modern times, through entire works devoted to a life (Montaigne or Michel Leiris), in one book or several (Rousseau, Nietzsche, Malraux, Michel Butor, or Roland Barthes). We might try to characterize it as a formula: “an imaginary stroll through a system of places, a repository of memory-images.”

This is the tradition to be found, with all the expected displacements, in certain obscure corners of the modern cinema. Here the impossible autobiography of cinema tends toward the forms of the self-portrait in various ways, more or less fragmentary, more or less developed. And it is this same movement that appeared about fifteen years ago in video art, only endowed with a new force and specific possibilities. This happened first in American video art, which took shape in this sense at the beginning of the 1970s. Soon after, the same idea took hold in European video art, with both similar effect and undeniable difference, especially in light of the more profound connection European video art had maintained with cinema. The tapes I have selected for this exposition are intended to bring this out, though the program is unfortunately burdened with the difficult, but unavoidable, task of tracing the idea of the self-portrait through only two works by each artist, with all the gaps and generalization this implies.

As to why video seems to lend itself more particularly, and certainly more exclusively than cinema, to the pursuit of the self-portrait, there are four major reasons:
The continual presence of the image in video, its instant feedback, which is always, without delay, like a double of real time; both go on and on, neither ever stops. This is similar, in part, to our relation to language, which provides an ongoing foundation out of which we form sentences in speech.

The possibility this affords authors of introducing their bodies more naturally and directly into the image, and so to gain direct access to their own images, and a means of wedding themselves to the intimacy of their gazes.

The third reason has to do with the image itself. It is much easier in video to play with the image and transform it, process it electronically, in both recording and post-production. The video image is thus more adept at translating the impressions of the eye, the movements of the body, the processes of thought. And all transformations the image undergoes seem more "natural," insofar as the video image itself is from the first more precarious, more unstable, and more artificial.

Finally, video, art video, is directly linked with television, with both its technology and its socio-cultural reality. Video seeks to distinguish itself from television, but depends on it nonetheless, both materially and culturally, setting the fragility of its subjective voice against the creeping tentacles of television's universality. In this regard, the video self-portrait repeats the history of the literary self-portrait as it emerged from a transformation of the means ancient rhetoric employed to assure the transmission of invention and memory. Today, "mass communications," as Barthes said, perform more or less the same positive functions once fulfilled by rhetoric.

THE BODY

Thus, the self-portrait bases itself above all on the experience of the body, of the author's own body as site and theater of experience. As such, the self-portrait has something in common with performance art and can in part be created in relation to it. But the former can never reduce itself to the latter. For one thing, the experience is inconceivable without the inscription of the body in the technical apparatuses (of sound and image) that allow one to explore the self through the very process of producing the work. For another thing, this inscription of the body occurs in specific places, with the elements of the "world