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**(un)childhood: performing the voices and times of childhood  
through relational video-making**

**Maria da Fonseca Moreira Santos**

Faculty of Media, Arts and Design

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*(un)childhood*  
**Performing the Voices and Times of Childhood Through  
Relational Video-Making**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
University of Westminster for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

February 2015

Maria Lusitano da Fonseca Moreira Santos

## Abstract

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This practice-based PhD is comprised of two interrelated elements:

(i) '*(un)childhood*', a 53' video-essay shown on two screens; and (ii) a 58286 word written thesis. The project, which is contextualised within the tradition of artists working with their own children on time-based art projects, explores a new approach to time-based artistic work about childhood. While Stan Brakhage (1933-2003), Ernie Gher (1943-), Erik Bullof (1963-) and Mary Kelly (1941-) all documented, photographed and filmed their children over a period of years to produce art projects (experimental films and a time-based installation), these projects were implicitly underpinned by a construction of childhood in which children, shown as they grow, represent the abstract primitive subject. The current project challenges the convention of representing children entirely from the adult's point of view, as aesthetic objects without a voice, as well as through the artist's chronological approach to time. Instead, this project focuses on the relational joining of the child's and adult's points of view. The artist worked on a video project with her own son over a four-and-a-half year period (between the ages of 5 and 10) through which she developed her 'relational video-making' methodology. The video-essay *(un)childhood* performs the relational voices of childhood as resulting from the verbal interactions of both children and adults. The non-chronological nature of *(un)childhood* offers an alternative to the linear-temporal approach to the representation of childhood. Through montage and a number of literal allusions to time in its dialogue, *(un)childhood* performs the relational times of childhood by combining children's lives in the present with the temporal dimensions that have traditionally constructed childhood: past, future and timeless.

## Acknowledgments

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This project was made possible by a scholarship from the Portuguese Governmental Foundation FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia). I would like to thank deeply my supervisor, Professor Joram ten Brink, for his unstinting support, immeasurable patience, personal warmth and cheerful smile. I would also like to thank the CREAM professors and lecturers Rosie Thomas, David Bate, Uriel Orlow and Marquard Smith, as well as all my colleagues, who have read and commented on cuts or drafts of this work, both the thesis and the video-essay. Any remaining flaws, omissions or misinterpretations remain my own. I am very grateful to my friends António Leal, Mónica Miranda, Patrik Aarnivara, Raymond Durand, and Arne Sjögren all of whom generously collaborated with me on this project by sharing their memories and experiences.

I am mostly grateful to my son, Mateus Lusitano Guarda and his father, Dinis Guarda, my ex-husband and best friend. The three of us have been together on this journey for a long time, and both of them have brought joy, creativity, knowledge and love to my days.

Finally I thank my fabulous alternative family of marvelous friends, for all their love, encouragement and support: Ana Sofia Santos, Beatriz Campos, Dinis Guarda, Inês Amado, Irene Rizzone, Israel Guarda, Fidan Aliyeva, Max Malikov, Mary Goodwin, Marta Wengorovius, Rui Mourão, Paula Roush, Paolo Rizzone, Raquel Santos, Rosália Guerreiro, Storm Turchi.

I dedicate this thesis to my loving parents Ilda Santos and Lusitano dos Santos.

I declare that all of the material contained in this thesis is my own work unless otherwise attributed.



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*(un)childhood*

Performing the voices and times of childhood through relational video-making

HD video, 53' 35''

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## Introduction

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I began to sketch out my project in the late summer and winter of 2007 as a result of moving from Portugal to Sweden with my four-year-old son, Mateus. My decision to study for a Masters in Fine Art (MFA), at the Malmö Art Academy in the southern Swedish city of Malmö, was based on a utopian dream and my idealized vision of the Swedish society. We left sunny Portugal, and, after a three-hour flight, landed in a cold and rainy Copenhagen. The high-speed train whisked us across the Öresund strait, and there we were, opening the door to our Swedish flat – our new home. I bought a bicycle with a child's seat, and during the next week, with nothing else to do, we excitedly explored the city streets and the shoreline on two wheels.

As we settled in the city and the first excitement faded, my concern grew about my son's welfare. Even though he was very young, I was apprehensive about his reaction to a sudden move to a new country and the potential adverse effects of both an abrupt immersion into a new language and the rupture from our close family ties in Lisbon. During this turbulent time I carried my video camera with me at all times and began to film Mateus when we played together. One day I asked him what he felt about our radical change in circumstances. Unexpectedly Mateus answered me back clearly: his replies gave me clear and valuable insights into his thoughts; these mirrored my own confused feelings and emotions. We continued to film together on numerous occasions so that, after two years, I had built up a small archive of video clips. My experience of our interactions during this period gave me two important understandings. Firstly, that adults, particularly parents, greatly influence what is characterized as the concept of childhood and secondly, that children, even very young ones, are able to communicate what they are experiencing if adults allow them to do so. As a new parent, therefore, I was eager to learn as much as I could about the concept of childhood and my own role as a parent contributing to its construction.

The invention of childhood, as a cultural concept, originated during the Enlightenment (Ariès P: 1962). It was inspired by literary oeuvres such as Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) and these texts were soon followed by the manufacture of visual images that helped to define and disseminate the concept. Since that time children have consistently been portrayed as symbols of innocence and creativity, and possessors of special capabilities such as "higher powers of perception" (Ariès P. 1962: 110 in Keller 1986: 186). In *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (1998), Anne Higonnet shows how this vision of childhood was so powerful that it prevailed up until today. It has influenced contemporary representations of childhood.

Patricia Holland, in *Picturing Childhood* (2004), writes how children have always been the "objects of imagery, very rarely its makers" (ibid: 20). She writes: "Until very recently, they have been defined as incapable of meaningful expression. They have not been in a position to manufacture a public image for themselves, and have had little control over the image others make of them" (ibid: 21). Higonnet and Holland both trace how childhood representation has changed with the invention of photography and cinema and argue that, traditionally, adults were the ones that fabricated images of childhood.

The cinematic representation of childhood was inaugurated on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December, 1895, in Salon Indien, a café in Paris, when the Lumière Brothers projected the 40 second film "*Repas de bébé*" as part of a program of ten films, exhibited in the first commercial presentation of the *Cinématographe*. This joyful short film documented two parents, August and Marie Euphrasie Lumière, feeding their baby girl, Andrée, at a table in the porch of the family's house. With this film the Lumière brothers set in motion the long tradition of parents using their children as models in filmic visual representations of childhood.

While some artist-parents have approached the representation of childhood in one-off or occasional projects, other artist-parents have sustained the same artistic project about childhood over many years. Their continuous practice enabled them to produce art projects that provide us with rich representations of childhood. These representations are drawn from the parents' extensive archives of their children's lives, and make use of many different media such as film, photography, sculpture, drawing or writing. A common characteristic of these long-term projects is that they are carried out from the exclusive viewpoint of the parent. The children involved participate, in a passive role, within the creative process. In addition, these projects tend to adopt a chronological structure in order to reflect the growth of the children themselves over time. In limiting the viewpoint exclusively to that of the artist-parent, and by taking a linear temporal approach to the representation of childhood, these art projects can be said to evoke a construction of childhood that follows the paradigm of development. The developmental paradigm, which emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific discourse, constructed the child initially as a tabula rasa – a type of primitive subject. The child's 'normal' growing process was seen as moving towards the outcome of a future civilized adult.

In the book *"Childhood Figurations"* (2002) Castañeda mentions how contemporary scholars have commented and criticised the developmental paradigm and the extent to which "development continues to establish a normative, universal "trajectory for "the human", lodged primarily in the child-body" (ibid: 43). Claudia Castañeda cites sociologists James and Prout's argument that state that: "The child has been theorised in terms of a past from which the child will soon develop into the adult; in terms of the projected time of future adulthood; or in a timeless mythical state of innocence, ignorance and purity (Prout 1990: 219 in Castañeda 2003: 43). James and Prout thus suggested that the temporal constructions that have been applied to

children in theory and practice, have dislodged children from the present, and have tended to ignore children's active participation in the world. The exact same type of temporal construction as the one described by Prout can be identified in long-term art projects done by artist parents with their children.

Returning to the timeline of my own research journey, at the end of 2009, we moved to London, where I began my practice-based arts PhD. Based on my own experiences with my son and other children in previous video practice, I now had two research questions and a clear goal: Through what ways can children actively participate and collaborate in the artistic process? How can the child's subjectivity and point of view be included and related to the one of the adult, in a video-essay dedicated to childhood?

My aim was to investigate possible ways of constructing a time-based art project, based around the theme of childhood representation, which included both the child's subjectivity and the child's point of view concomitant with my own. In order to do so I aimed to focus on a depiction of the relational voices and times of childhood.

The importance I attached to including the child's subjectivity was inspired by new understandings coming from the field of the 'new sociology of childhood'. Its critical standpoint sought to emphasise children's agency and to consider children's lives in the here and now by advocating practices that "can grasp childhood as a continually experienced and created social phenomenon which has significance for its present, as well as the past and the future" (James and Prout 1990: 231). The additional aim of including my own subjectivity in the project resulted from a strong understanding that my identity, as the parent of the child, needed to be clearly acknowledged. This follows the contemporary notion of the interconnectedness existent between the world of children and adults. In "*Childhood figurations*" (2002) Claudia Castañeda writes how the West has developed the notion of "the child as a

parental project” (76), where “we are now responsible for them in a new way: “our” input literally materializes the child-brain's neuronal connections” (ibid). Contemporary standards of parenting have long abandoned the idea of the child as someone “to be looked at” instead adopting the idea of the child as someone we should “talk to and listen to”. My personal parenting experience taught me that new approaches to parenting reinforce the standpoint of dialogue and open communication.

For the past four and a half years I have co-filmed with my son, using a methodology that I have entitled ‘relational video-making’. I have also recorded conversations with friends (both children and adults) about childhood and childhood memory. Our collaborative process has resulted in a 53’35” video-essay entitled *(un)childhood* which is presented in two half screens.

Relational video-making is an umbrella term that combines diverse collaborative filmmaking practices. Its name is inspired by the concept of ‘relational aesthetics’ as described by Nicolas Bourriaud in his book entitled *Relational Aesthetics (1998)*, in which he proposed a model of art theory that could be applied to a new type of art that was “process-related or behavioural”. The main characteristic of relational video-making is the promotion of video encounters between the project’s participants, each participant using a handy cam or smartphone camera to film. The three main types of practices that are part of relational video-making are the following:

- Shared filmmaking and ‘play’;
- Video recorded conversations;
- Relating time: editing past and present images of childhood on a split screen.

The two first practices were used in our fieldwork practice, whereas the third practice was only used when editing the video-essay. The first practice concerns the

use of 'play' and shared filmmaking methodologies. It originated from a desire to find engaging ways to collaborate artistically with children whilst avoiding the imposition of my own artistic practices upon the child's life. The second practice refers to the use of the video/smartphone camera as a way to promote and record video conversations with both my son (and sometimes my nephews) and a group of adult friends. The third and final practice corresponds to the editing strategy used in the video: a split screen dividing the screen in two halves. The split screen function is to symbolize a plural relational voice, as well as to facilitate the simultaneous display of past and present images of childhood. In the two half screens I edited an old personal archive of super 8 mm films and photographs from my own childhood, recorded by my uncle and father. I related these two sources to short excerpts from three fictional films that marked my own childhood. These sources were then, in turn, related to clips extracted from the contemporary archive, which had been created in collaboration mainly with my son, but also with my nephews and two adult friends.

My thesis is divided into two parts, the video-essay *(un)childhood*, and this written component. The written thesis is divided into five chapters. The video-essay *(un)childhood* presents a novel approach to childhood that results from a more collaborative filmic practice with children. The original contribution of the thesis and video-essay *(un)childhood* is two-fold. Firstly, to perform the relational voices of childhood in the video-essay, as resulting from interactions happening between children and adults. Secondly, to use a novel approach to time that includes and relates both the classical 'time of childhood' understood as the past, the future and the timeless and the present "time in childhood" – meaning the present days in children's lives. This is achieved through the methodology of relational video-making, as I will demonstrate in the written thesis.

In Chapter 1 of the written thesis, I review how childhood has been represented



since the Enlightenment and how this way of representing and conceptualizing childhood has conditioned the way we look at children and represent children right up to the present day. I review the work of three artist parents who have worked with their children on time based media art projects.

For over four years experimental filmmakers Stan Brakhage, Erik Bullof and Ernie Gehr all methodically documented the lives of their children. Their resulting filmic projects about childhood, have adopted a linear approach to time. Stan Brakhage (1933-2003) wanted to represent, in film, the development of the human vision from birth onwards, as part of his life-long investigation into sight and perception. He filmed his five children over a number of years to create experimental autobiographical films. Erik Bullof and Ernie Gehr, are two contemporary experimental filmmakers. They have designed projects that depict their children's growing up processes. Erik Bullof filmed his child Felix, from his birth up until he was 10 years old, to make four film diaries (entitled *Le Calcul du Sujet* (2000), *Oh oh oh!* (2002), *La Belle étoile* (2004), and *Tohu Bohu* (2008). Ernie Gehr filmed his son Daniel up until he was four, to make his film *For Daniel* (1996). In all of these films, children are depicted without voice. Both say that they were inspired, in their projects with their children, by the early cinema of the Lumière brothers.

In Chapter 2 I look more closely at the works reviewed in the first chapter, interpreting them now as 'cultural texts' (Nichols 1995: 83) and as filmic experimental ethnographies of childhood. In this chapter I present and describe artist Mary Kelly's time-based installation *Post Partum Document* (UK, 1973-1979), which can be also be read as an experimental ethnography. In her project, Kelly takes the role of an "ethnographer" and "scientist" in order to study herself and her son over the course of six years. She appropriates scientific methodologies to the artistic context and interprets her observations through the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and Lacan.

*Post Partum Document* can be read as a representation of childhood through the paradigm of the inter-subjective relationship of motherhood.

Revisiting these four works once again, but now through the lens of experimental ethnography in film, I observe how they are structured around two main axes. Firstly, they strongly reflect the voice of the artist, (understood here as the artist's viewpoint), in a process that may be considered auto-ethnographical, as the child is taken as being the same as the artist. Secondly they are structured through a linear approach to time, that I will read as alluding to a classical ethnographical paradigm, entitled the pastoral paradigm. The pastoral paradigm, first described by James Clifford in his famous essay *On Ethnographical Allegory* (1986), used to be particularly prevalent in classical models of ethnography, and corresponded to a pattern and a way of producing ethnographic texts, that tended to idealize remote and past times – ultimately the ones inhabited by our oldest ancestors. Those past times were perceived as ones that provided human beings with a fuller sensation of authenticity and wholeness, which, in comparison, were seen as impossible to attain in contemporary days, which are seen as being fragmented and disrupted. The four art projects reviewed in this research, which have widely used pastoral settings, can be said to evoke the pastoral paradigm and the myth of primitivism.

In the second part of chapter 2 I look more closely at the ways in which artists have operated in their fieldwork practice, i.e. in their daily lives shared with their children. Since the artists have observed, described and filmed their children in a very detached manner, one may say that their fieldwork practice is very similar to the classic Malinowskian '*mise en scène*' of traditional ethnography. The difference is that their practices were done in the realm of art and not ethnography. Likewise, children were made to participate passively in their parents' creative practices quite consistently, which has slightly altered the children's daily lives, as some the artists later on

acknowledged. Children were represented abstractly as “aesthetical objects” and symbols of a concept, losing their own specific voice and identity.

Looking for alternative models of dealing with the representation of childhood I review the work done in the field of visual anthropology, particularly the film work and writings of visual anthropologist, David MacDougall, who, for more than a decade, has worked with children on various projects. I present MacDougall’s five film project, *Doon School Quintet (2000-2004)*, that resulted from two years of filming in a boarding school in India. The films depict children engaged in conversations with each other and the filmmaker, and put forward an original approach to time, as the five films act as a cluster, each revisiting the same events from a different perspective, thus abandoning a linear approach to temporality. His filmmaking practice made him reconsider his initial assumptions about the meanings of childhood and has inspired the conversational practices developed in this project

In Chapter 3, I describe in detail my methodology, that I entitle “relational video-making”. The term relational video-making was inspired by Nicholas Bourriaud’s book entitled *“Relational Aesthetics”* (1998). In it, Bourriaud describes ‘relational aesthetics’ as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (ibid: 113). To Bourriaud, art is a “state of encounter” (ibid: 18) resulting from constant negotiations. In addition, I also review the work of ethnographic filmmaker, Jean Rouch, and explain how I have applied his methods to my own context of playing with children.

Chapter 4 offers a textual analysis of the video-essay *(un)childhood*, by describing how it performs the relational voices of childhood resulting from the conjugation of the viewpoint of the child to the one of the adult. I explain how in *(un)childhood* ‘voice’ acts as the embodiment of the subjectivities of both the child and

the adult and these are put in relation with each other in various play moments and conversations. The literal use of the child's voice has a political meaning, one that can be interpreted through the lens of feminist and post-colonial studies that have historically connected voice to agency. Through voice, in the film, the child achieves a clear and personal identity, as being an active, creative and thinking being. Another aspect reviewed is how the use of "play" allows both of us (me and my son) to swap and subvert fixed identities such as the one of the child and the parent. This chapter also acknowledges how our collaboration was limited to our fieldwork practice, partly because my son wasn't interested in the editing process or even in holding the camera when we were filming. An unexpected thing that happened though, was that after we had stopped the filming while playing together, Mateus started a YouTube channel with vlogs of his daily life, that he recorded with the camera of his laptop, and with various musical video clips done by himself. He asked me to teach him how to use the editing software Final Cut Pro, and he began editing his own videos. With his authorisation I included excerpts of his vlogs in the video essay and one musical video clip done autonomously by Mateus.

Concerning the adult's point of view, it is expressed predominantly through me, as I am the main interlocutor of the child, in our conversations or play moments. My own subjectivity is displayed in two ways: as a parent and as someone carrying a set of unique childhood memories. The "voice" or point of view of the adult is also expressed in subtitles, articulating my silent thoughts. My childhood memories, present as images and as verbal recollections, are contextualized to the childhood memories of my friends that were gathered in various conversations that occurred with my friends. Parenthood is openly approached in this project as being the type of relationship that most influences childhood. In various dialogues with friends, parenthood is contextualized to the experiences of others, and its role, as a key player in the cultural construction of

childhood, is acknowledged. Finally the chapter discusses how the film constructs childhood through a plural relational voice: the one resulting from both the interplay of the child's and the adult's subjectivities. *(un)childhood* can thus be said to perform childhood as a "culturally prescribed performance" (Gergen 2009:75) constructed in co-action by both children and adults. This chapter also analyses the limitations of this project, and whether its initial goals were achieved, by analysing how different interests and asymmetry in terms of power between children and adults, conditioned its outcome.

Chapter 5 re-analyses my video-essay, from the point of view of its temporal construction. It explains how this video-essay performs time in a novel way, due to it being edited in a non-chronological way; its use of a split screen; and its display of various reflexive dialogues about time. It is my contention that *(un)childhood* offers an alternative approach to time to that which is usually used to represent childhood. *(un)childhood* performs the relational times of childhood, thus disrupting the linear temporal approach and thus breaking with the classical developmental paradigm, as the one mostly used to represent childhood. The video-essay displays the active and dynamic presence of children in the present and in close communication and interconnection with the adults surrounding them, but it also presents all the other temporal dimensions. Time is thus worked through in the film in a relational way. Through montage, by using the split screen, by using multi-layering of voices and sounds and by alluding to time in various conversations, the video-essay displays how all the different temporal dimensions that construct childhood are profoundly entangled in each other.

## Chapter 1 Picturing Childhood

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### Introduction

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Across the field of visual arts one can find artists who, during and after the experience of motherhood/fatherhood, have worked with the representation of their children. Most of the works undertaken by these artists were short-term projects, but a few were developed, over several years, with a specific and focused goal in mind. It is the latter group of artists whom I wish to concentrate on: they have sought to use their children as a way to portray a variety of issues relating directly, or indirectly, to the concept of childhood. These issues include: growth; childhood memory; childhood vision; the origins of cinema; or their own parental experience. Even though the way they have represented children has varied significantly, they have each created powerful and intricate visualizations of the concept of childhood through the documentation of their children's daily lives over the years.

According to the historian Philippe Ariès (1962), the concept of "childhood" emerged during the Enlightenment period through the influence of works such as Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762). The concept of childhood originating at that time encompassed a special set of qualities such as innocence and creativity, and special capabilities such as "higher powers of perception" (Ariès P. 1962 110 in Keller 1986: 186). This concept has, right up to the present day, strongly shaped the way we look at children and represent children. Throughout this time, images have been used as visual fictions to help define and disseminate these concepts of childhood. In *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (1998), Anne Higonnet describes the history of how images began to represent children by bestowing these new qualities onto them. According to Anne Higonnet, the first visual conceptualization representing childhood as innocence can be attributed to elite eighteenth-century

British portrait painters such as Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Henry Raeburn (ibid: 9). Higonnet calls this collective vision of childhood “Romantic childhood” (ibid). However, this Eighteenth Century approach to childhood was soon to change due to the invention of photography and, later, cinema. In her book, which focuses mainly on photography, Higonnet shows how the “ideal of childhood innocence entered a crisis out of which a new definition of childhood emerged” (ibid: 7). According to Higonnet, the artists who contributed the most to this new vision of the child were artist-parents who had worked with their own children’s representation. These produced new visual conceptualizations of childhood that challenged the old paradigms. Higonnet called this new way of representing children “the knowing child” (ibid: 207).

Higonnet’s analysis of visual representations of childhood, particularly within the context of photography, brings interesting insights to my own research on childhood representation within the context of parenthood. The projects reviewed here differ from Higonnet’s examples in that they are time-based media and they all picture childhood in a particular way: through ‘growth’. I have chosen the artists reviewed below because their method of gathering daily data, over a number of years, from their children’s lives, has produced rich and complex representations of childhood. These representations are the result of a long process of artistic practice, occurring within the context of a relationship: the relationship of an adult actively engaged with their children. In this chapter I will analyse these works as “pictures” of childhood, and, in the second chapter, as descriptions or experimental ethnographies of childhood.

Within this setting I will review the projects of three artists, who come from different age generations. They are experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage; experimental filmmaker/visual artist Erik Bullof; and structuralist filmmaker Ernie Gehr. In the

following chapter I will review a work of another artist, Mary Kelly, entitled Post Partum Document.

A common attribute of the projects undertaken by these artists is their time-based methodology. The artists have represented their children's growth in projects structured as organized chronological diaries. The artists have not only processed their footage chronologically, they have also used a consistent methodology to work with their children by regularly collecting audio, visual, and textual footage of their children's actions and development to be processed later on into the final artwork.

Stan Brakhage (1932-2003) was an experimental filmmaker who, between the fifties and the end of the last century, produced more than 350 films. Many of these films were created with footage gathered from his family of five children. Brakhage used many pioneering techniques such as painting directly onto the film stock, scratching it, and working with multiple exposures. The four-year project, *Scenes from Under Childhood (1967-1970)*, was a particularly important film for Brakhage's research into childhood. In this autobiographical project, Brakhage attempts to represent the way children see the world from birth onwards and charts their progress, as they grow older.

Erik Bullo is a contemporary artist and experimental filmmaker. In 1997, he began a series of silent films, shot with a 16mm camera, following the life of his son Felix, from Felix's birth until the age of ten years. In these films Felix's image appears throughout, always filmed in the same places: on the beach; in the forest; and on the balcony of their summerhouse. The filmmaker directs his son to fix his gaze at the camera. These films aim to represent the origins of cinema by exploring the child's gaze as a metaphor of the gaze of the first spectators of film. At the same time they are also highly personal, evoking the family photo album. Ernie Gehr also filmed his own son, intensely, over four years, with a fixed camera and a single angle from which to



film thereby producing the film, *For Daniel* (1996). Both artists were inspired by the films of the Lumière brothers.

Through a detailed description and analysis of the art projects mentioned above, I aim to show that, even though these projects contributed to (some more than others) and laid the groundwork for challenging the concept of childhood as defined during the Enlightenment, their emphasis on the diary format have conditioned these representations of childhood to a 'developmental' paradigm. Furthermore, the artists' decision to collaborate with their children, using exactly the same observational method over the many years of their practice, has, I believe, limited the possibilities of representation of the concept of childhood. This representation was created through an exclusively adult point of view, since the artists didn't explore their children's subjectivities, even when their children reached an age that enabled them to do so. A striking example of this is how, in the projects reviewed in this chapter, children are pictured in silence.

In "*Picturing Childhood, The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery*" (2004), Patricia Holland states that "over history children have been the objects of imagery, but rarely its makers. Their voices had only limited access to the channels that produce public meanings, and even then, the tools that are available to them have been inevitably honed by adults" (ibid: 21). She describes how children have been represented as a "muted group" quoting James and Prout (1990: 101), who have, in "*Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*" (1990), analysed the way the cultural concept of childhood has changed over time. Holland criticizes this type of approach to childhood as a 'silenced group', referring to how it excludes richer and more meaningful possibilities of childhood representation. She writes: "Children should certainly be heard as much as they are seen. We could then expect an even richer pleasure from the image" (ibid: 206).

The projects presented here have produced representations of childhood that are exclusively seen through the adult's "voice", or point of view, in keeping with the history of art since the Enlightenment. Artists not only avoided working with their children's voices and points of view, but they have approached time linearly to construct their visual conceptualizations of childhood. This approach has excluded contemporary visions of the meanings of childhood, such as the ones introduced by James and Prout (1990), who argue that, through a critique of the way time has been used in developmentalism, a new type of conceptualization of children as "competent social actors" (ibid: 15) can be formulated.

## 1. Images of childhood

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According to art historian, Phillipe Ariès (1962), it was during the Enlightenment that the concept of childhood emerged, influenced by new ideas about the child coming from texts such as *Émile*, written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762. New approaches to concepts of childhood needed pictures, not only to describe these concepts in a short-hand way, but also to consolidate and disseminate these new ideas. In *"Pictures of Innocence: the History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood"* (1998), Anne Higonnet describes how the changing concept of childhood provided us with varying visual images of children. According to Higonnet, childhood as innocence was possibly the first pictorial representation of "childhood" as a specific concept. As a metaphor of innocence, the child's body appeared particularly convenient, both because "it was supposed to be naturally innocent of adult sexuality, and because the child's mind was supposed to begin blank" (ibid: 8). Curiously, as the figure of "the child" was being constructed and subsequently commercialized "it was simultaneously being feminized" (ibid: 9). The first art movement that dealt with childhood as "innocence" was that of the eighteenth-century British portrait painters, particularly Sir

Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Henry Raeburn (ibid). These painters introduced a new vision of the child that Higonnet calls “Romantic childhood” (ibid). This type of childhood representation was embraced with enthusiasm, and spread quickly, through the emergence of the mass market in industrial illustrations. Then, as photography and, subsequently, cinema, emerged as new technologies of the image, this type of representation of childhood continued to be reproduced. In fact, photography was considered to be even “more convincingly realistic than any other medium” as it made possible for “the ideal of romantic childhood to seem as completely natural” (ibid). This ideal of childhood was so powerful that, even today, it has influenced the way we relate to childhood. But, as the world transformed itself economically and socially, visual representations also changed. Photography, and later film, precipitated the crisis of the ideal of childhood innocence



Figure 1: Cottage Girl With Dog And Pitcher by Sir Thomas Gainsborough, 1785

According to Higonnet, the impossibility of sustaining the absolute ideal of childhood occurred in a process similar to the one happening when photography

recognized how it was impossible to maintain the “absolute belief in photography’s objective neutrality” (ibid: 10). This happened when photography became more and more aware of the unfeasibility of eliminating the “photographer’s subjective participation in the photographic process” (ibid). The crisis in the ideal of innocence occurred when the vision of sexuality was interpreted as being present in photographs of children. Higonnet writes: “More and more sexual meanings are now being ascribed to photographs of children, both past and present, whether because of what it is in the photographer or what it is in the eye of the beholder” (ibid). Society began to acknowledge how childhood representation was intertwined with adult desires and subjectivities. On the other hand, over time, the image of the child also changed as it “became more physical, and more involved in the world of adults” (ibid: 12).

Patricia Holland, in *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery* (2004), refers to this crisis in the ideal of childhood innocence, by pointing out the way that childhood became more overtly a focus for challenging taboos: “There seems to be a *need* to violate innocence – or perhaps it is a recognition that innocence will in any case be violated, and that dreaded moment must be rehearsed in fantasy and imagery. Childhood has come to embody the thrill of the forbidden and the excitement of taboo” (p. xiii). Holland also mentions how photography’s accuracy “changed the ways in which memory and observation could operate” (ibid: 10).

With the advent of the cinema also came the questioning of the ideal of romantic childhood. In *Childhood and Cinema* (2008), Vicki Lebeau examines how cinema opened up “new ways of seeing and showing the child: as spectacle, as subject” (ibid: 8). In becoming aware that children were “everywhere on our screens”, Lebeau showed how cinema is an overwhelming resource for “reflecting on the cultural histories of childhood in the twentieth century” (ibid: 12). She writes: “there are

changes in sensibilities towards childhood – childhood and sexuality, childhood and suffering – throughout the century of cinema” (ibid: 19).

Another important aspect of the portrayal of childhood cited by Lebeau, was the manner in which the new visual technologies of photography and cinema changed our relationship to memory. According to Lebeau, cinema brought with it the possibility “to bring the end of a man’s life into renewed and mobile contact with its beginning” (ibid: 33). Cinema and photography quickly became an experience of the everyday that would revolutionize the way one relates to memory. This had its dark side, as some of these images could evoke memories that one would rather forget, as mentioned by Lebeau when stating that “such images may well have a unique capacity to haunt us” (ibid: 139).

As we have seen from Higonnet, Holland and Lebeau’s work, the advent of cinema and photography, as well as the social and economic changes in society at the beginning of last century, transformed childhood representation away from the dominant romantic ideal. Higonnet (1998) identifies the emergence of a new conception of childhood in visual representation calling it “the knowing child” (ibid: 207). These “knowing children”, she states, “ have bodies and passions of their own. They are also often aware of adult bodies and passions, whether as mimics or only witnesses” (ibid). In her study she points out how some of the most interesting and challenging new visions of childhood have been done by artists who are also parents (ibid: 208). Higonnet gives the example of a 1971 *Time-Life* special edition dedicated to children, entitled *Photographing Children*, which “diagnosed sclerosis in traditional childhood types, and heralded ‘A Newer – and more Honest – View’” (ibid). The professional photographers, who were also parents, were the ones who took the oddest pictures of their own children – which is relevant to my own concerns with childhood representation created by artist-parents. When analyzing these photographic

projects, Higonnet comes to the conclusion that childhood representation is also “about children’s relationships to the adults who photograph them” (ibid: 209). Images of childhood can also be viewed today through the lens of the debates concerning the concept of the family. Likewise Higonnet refers how: “As they call into question the norm of the dream nuclear family and the fiction of the family album, explorations of familial relationships bring to light what had been unseen” (ibid).

So, one can say that in order to produce a visual representation that corresponds to a conception of childhood, the adult photographer/filmmaker uses a human being that is a real child. That child is the “object” through which the artist will visualize that idea. And even though one knows that what we have with a film or a photograph is just a visual fictional idea, the presence of a child in photography or in film can be interpreted as providing us with traces of reality. This process is even more intense in film, since the characteristics of its moving image, makes film carry within itself the traces of the processes children have to go through, in order to be represented in a certain way. Could some of those moving images haunt the memories of the children who were represented in those films or images, since those children will have a life that will be extended beyond the image?

In “*Childhood in Film*” (2008) Vicki Lebeau looked back at the first movies of childhood that could be recognized as being ‘amusing’ and ‘tender’ “child pictures”. These were very popular at the beginning of cinema. But others, particularly if seen through the eyes and sensibilities of the present day, can be seen as frightening. Lebeau gives the example of the film *Little Albert*, made in 1919 by psychologist John Watson. In this film, Watson exposed a nine-month old baby, Albert, to a series of stimuli, including a white rat, a rabbit, a monkey, masks, and burning newspapers, trying to trigger fear in him and investigating the boy’s reactions and the way the emotions are conditioned. Another example is the 1961 film, *Terminus*, by John

Schlesinger, which depicts a day in the life of Waterloo railway station. In one sequence a mother leaves her young boy alone in the middle of the concourse, so that the filmmaker can film the boy's distress when trying to look for her. Even though the scene had been 'staged', writes Lebeau, the ones who had agreed on "losing the child" were the film director and the child's mother (ibid: 18). This leads Lebeau to ask: "what is the price of the image of the child on screen?" (ibid).



Figure 2: Frame from film "Terminus" (1961) by John Schlesinger

Patricia Holland, in *Picturing Childhood* (2004), refers to how society is becoming aware how children have always been the "objects of imagery, very rarely its makers" (ibid: 20). She writes:

"Like all groups without power, they suffer the indignity of being unable to present themselves as they would want to be seen or, indeed, even considering how they might want to be seen. Until very recently, they have been defined as incapable of meaningful expression. They have not been in a position to manufacture their own public image, and have had little control of the image others make of them. Children are, in the words of James and Prout, "a muted group". (...) Without any input from children themselves, childhood can only remain an impossible concept, always mediated by adulthood, its "guileless" innocence" searched, but never found" (ibid: 20-21).

But the meanings of the concept of childhood are changing. E. Burman and J. Stacey, in an article published in a special edition of the journal *Feminist Theory* (2010), dedicated to: *The child and childhood in feminist theory*, write how, throughout the first decade of the 21st century, original studies which refer to the representation of childhood have emerged. These include such studies as Claudia Castañeda's *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (2002), Erica Burman's *Developments: Child, Image, Nation* (2008a), Emma Wilson's *Cinema's Missing Children* (2003), Victoria Flanagan's *Into the Closet: Cross-dressing and the Gendered Body in Children's Literature and Film* (2007), Karen Lury's *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales* (2010) and Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child, or Growing up Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2010). These studies, they write, are evidence of an interesting shift in the way childhood is approached and represented in the fields of history, literature, cultural and visual studies, critical psychology and development studies (ibid: 227); they are inspired and informed by the desire to look at the child as a "competent social actor" (James and Prout 1990 in Burman and Stacey 2010: 230).

Over the last few decades some projects have emerged, directly or indirectly alluding to children who are willing to represent themselves. Some of these are quite disturbing since they are troubled by trauma or distress: for example the autobiographical video diaries of Sadie Benning, made in the nineties with a pixel vision camcorder; Richard Billingham's artist book *Ray's a Laugh* (2000); or Jonathan Caouette's widely praised film, *Tarnation* (2003), edited with the editing software iMovie that comes bundled with any Apple computer. Caouette made his film with video footage (shot on a Sony Handycam and a Super 8 camera) that he recorded over a period of 19 years, starting from when he was 11 years old. Caouette re-enacted his childhood, and filmed and interviewed his family as a way to address his relationship to his mother's mental illness. Caouette's film is interpreted by Lebeau as



evidencing “how a child might begin not only to create a visual document of his life but also to use the camera to survive that life” (2008: 190). If adults have tended to represent children as objects, without taking children’s points of view into consideration, it seems that now that children are able to represent themselves (and their relationships to the adult world), they mirror the adults’ processes of representation. To many observers, Caouette’s camera is felt to be highly intrusive and abusive to his mother and grandparents’ domestic environments.

If one sided points of view, whether coming from the world of adults or of children, always seem to leave something out of the picture, a more relational approach to childhood that would include both sides could enable better and fuller representations of childhood. As Patricia Holland says: “When children’s voices are effective, adult’s definitions are of necessity less rigid. They are not necessarily replaced by other definitions, but by an approach that is sensitive to the ever-shifting perspectives of meaning” (2004: 21).

## 2. Picturing childhood through the diary

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### The diary as a chart of development

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Throughout art history, in whatever field and time frame we look at, visual artists have occasionally worked with their own children on their art projects: Norman Rockwell’s son posed as a model for his father paintings, Sally Mann regularly photographed her three children throughout their childhood, and French filmmaker, Agnès Varda, had her son participate in several of her films. Narrowing down a bit the field of artists working with their children, we then find a particular group of artists who have worked with their children on a deeper and more focused way and for various years. To produce their art projects, these artists developed a specific methodology of

relating artistically to their children over several years. These can be seen as providing us with visual representations of childhood. A common characteristic of these projects (that will be presented in more detail further on) is that they have a time-based structure that follows the calendar. These projects unfold around a linear timeline of progress, to either directly or indirectly represent childhood growth.

As these artists are parents, their use of the calendar doesn't come as a surprise. Parenting means routines and timetables such as check-ups with the pediatrician to assess your child's development and growth, regular birthday parties, and booking trips according to the school calendar.

Growth, the process of increasing in size, development and maturity, is one of the most fascinating processes of life for people across cultures. Watching the process of growth gives us pleasure and a sense of harmony, compensating for life's inevitable losses. Growth reminds us that linear time is always inscribed in a cyclic one. If we all grow up to inevitably die one day, there will be new lives to follow us in our footsteps. Observing the growth of our children reminds us of our own past story. When one becomes a parent, one suddenly has the opportunity to observe and socialize with human growth on a daily basis. And the urge to register growth is unavoidable.

With the advent of photography, and then cinema, a recent tradition emerged, through the family album or the home movie, of keeping a visual record of children growing up. Visual representations of childhood growth can be said to evoke scientific models of child development.

In *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (2002), Claudia Castañeda describes how development has been a way to figure and bring children into being (ibid: 4). By using "figuration" as a tool to characterize the way the child is presented in discourse, Claudia Castañeda claims that: "To understand the child in terms of figuration locates the child in a wide nexus of linked transformative trajectories that point to the uses of

its mutability” (ibid). One of these trajectories is “development” (ibid). Development is defined by Castañeda as a “distinctively human and embodied transformation” (ibid: 4). Up until today, the name most associated with development is still the one of developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget, due to his influential theory of cognitive development. If the developmental model had a tremendous influence on the way childhood was studied and, consequently represented over the last century, recent studies have questioned developmentalism, and opened up other possibilities of approaching childhood (Burman 2010; Walkerdine 1993; James and Prout 1990; Gergen 1990; Radhika Viruru 2004 et al).

Some of these studies criticize the biases of the developmental model, pointing out how it normalizes childhood, by following the “up the hill” model of science and progress (Rorty 1980 in Burman 2008: 252). Burman also points out the colonial and gendered nuances present in the developmental model, which tends to logic. She writes: “Logic, epitomized within “the scientific method”, is cast as the pinnacle of intellectual development. This produces a model of thinking that treats the individual as prior and separate, and celebrates activity and discovery – qualities which also carry colonial and gendered nuances” (Burman 2008: 250).

In Castañeda’s study, in a chapter entitled “*Developmentalism and the Child in Nineteenth Century Science*”, the author analyses nineteenth century scientific discourses about childhood. According to Castañeda, an aspect of this model, when applied to childhood, is the way it allegorizes history: “the child was figured as an instance of the “human” through which the history of humanity could also be told” (ibid: 13). These discourses, she claims, made the child a “heterogeneous thing”, as “the child-body was used “to conjure other kinds of bodies in the time and space of “global” human history” (ibid: 14). The child symbolized and embodied the ancient time of the savage and the child’s development re-enacted the history of humanity. As we will see,

this important aspect is present in the projects that will be reviewed due to their particular approach to time.

Classical and scientific discourses about childhood have been so powerful that artists have appropriated them to the context of their own art projects concerning childhood. Just like the example given by Claudia Castañeda, of Charles Darwin who wrote a diary about the regular development of his son from birth, artists have recorded, through visual methods, the progressive development of their children over several years, using the diary in a double way. On the one hand they have detachedly documented through audio, visual, and textual methodologies their children's lives for various years. On the other hand this footage was later processed into a final artwork configured as diary films, or as an installation organized as a diary, and that includes excerpts of a written diary. Due to the time span of these projects, the films/installations were divided into intermediate sections that were periodically exhibited over the years. Those sections would later become part of the overall project. This has happened with the various film diaries of filmmaker Erik Bullot, as well as Brakhage's numbered film series. All of these artists used the chronological diary as an artistic form to produce their projects.

### [The Diary Film](#)

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Laura Rascaroli, in *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (2009), tries to define the characteristics of the written diary, summarizing its attributes in a chapter dedicated to the diary film. For Rascaroli, the diary reflects the banality of everyday existence (Langford and West 1999: 6 in Rascaroli 2009: 116). In opposition to scientific diaries, the artistic diary has a strong focus on the "self" since it is through the diaristic practice that the self becomes the center of the individual, granting a person "identity, unity, wholeness and harmony" (ibid: 117). This centered

“self” is unsettled though, due to the act of making a diary, and its implicit construction of identity as a double, “as writer, and as the matter of his writing” (Didier 1976: 116 in Rascaroli 2009: 117). In addition there is the question of the linguistic variety of expressions of the diary that also multiplies the writing “self” (Langford and West 1999: 9 in Rascaroli 2009: 117).

Another dimension to the diary is the audience: due to the act of writing, the diary implies an audience (Culley 1985: 8 in Rascaroli 2009: 118). But the diary reader has specific characteristics, since he or she is an “intimate reader” (Rousset 1986 in Rascaroli 2009: 118) who oscillates between the role “of a confidant and that of a voyeur” (Lejeune 1989 in Rascaroli 2009: 118). In any case the diary is “ultimately self-addressed; it is a form of auto-communication” (Rousset 1983: 438 in Rascaroli 2009: 118).

Addressing temporality, Rascaroli states, “if there is one defining trait shared by all diaries it is the significance of time, no matter how discretely conveyed, as a framework to chart experience” (Heller in Rascaroli 2009: 120). Temporality is an important characteristic of the diary and the diary and its blank pages can be seen as a metaphor of the future. As the future arrives it enables the diary’s author to fill the empty pages.

Rascaroli then considers how the concept of the diary taken as “life writing” has crossed the borders of literature and has become the object of interest for various subjects including art, art history and visual studies (ibid: 121). An artist’s oeuvre can be interpreted as his or her “diary” (ibid: 121).

Brakhage’s many films, Erik Bullot and Ernie Gehr’s diary films, (that will be reviewed in the pages following), and Mary Kelly’s installation, *Post Partum Document*, (that I will describe in Chapter 2), are all examples of artistic visual work that can be understood as diaries, structured through a linear temporality.

The diary film is considered to have emerged during the 1960s from the “private” movies (home-movies) and the avant-garde practices of a number of women filmmakers, such as Marie Menken, who is considered to be one of the first diary filmmakers, as well as from the personal portraits of filmmaker Stan Brakhage (Rascaroli 2009: 122). The diary film became common in the 1970s within North American avant-garde practitioners such as Andrew Noren, Robert Hout, Howard Guttenplan, Ed Pincus and Jonas Mekas (James 1992: 151). What defined this genre, considered to be part of the essayistic film (Russell 1999: 277), was the recording of the everyday banal occurrences of life and its subjects in a specific type of language, characterized as being hybrid and transgressive.

David E. James considers that there is a peculiar type of temporality which differentiates the diary film from the written diary: “In the written diary, a gap typically occurs between the events and their recordings; the opposite is true in film, which cannot escape the present and the present tense, for filming can only capture events as they happen” (James 1992: 153 in Rascaroli 2009: 128). If according to James the diary film evidences a dispersion of authorship, Rascaroli presents a contrasting point of view: “the textual commitment and the pact with the spectator establish the diary film as the product of its author” (2009: 130). Rascaroli also mentions how the diary film

registers memory in a interesting way: if the written diary form “reorders, reports, and comments on the author’s memory of events, the filmic form reorders, reports and comments on indexical traces of reality” (ibid: 129).

Rascaroli refers to the diary film, emerging from avant-garde practices, as “a marginal genre which often borders and often merges with other related forms, for instance the essay, the notebook, the home movie, the autobiography, the travelogue, and the self-portrait” (ibid: 131). Continuing to cite these similarities, she refers to the diary film as a form that is always in close connection with other visual, audio-visual and online diaristic forms. She concludes that the diary form is a form of the personal film, a subjective art form; in it “the enunciator says “I” and talks to a “you” that is himself or herself ” (ibid: 131). This also intensifies the sensation of those films being an accurate record of life occurrences of authors and of author’s emotions and ideas.

By relocating the characteristics of the diary film, summarized here, to the context of the art projects studied in this and the following chapter, we can claim that the use of the linear temporality of the diary, as a way to depict childhood, reinforces in these projects, the metaphor of the child as an “empty being”, waiting to be “filled” through the acquisition of language and socialization. Likewise, the diary’s white pages can be seen as standing for the emptiness of experience, and the lack of lived time, which evokes a particular temporal conceptualization of childhood that privileges the developmental paradigm. The artist’s use of the diary also evokes a very personal and autobiographical approach to childhood representation.

#### [The child’s vision: Stan Brakhage’s films of childhood](#)

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Stan Brakhage (1933-2003) was an American experimental filmmaker who extensively explored representations of childhood in film. He produced an immense oeuvre of 350 to 400 films, in which he pioneered various filmmaking techniques,

investigating and pushing forward the representation of family life within the personal film. Brakhage was born in an orphanage in Kansas City, adopted at an early age, and given the name James Stanley Brakhage (James 2005:1). In 1957 he married Jane Collom, and, in 1964, the couple moved to the mountains of Colorado, to live in a small cabin in Lump Gulch, a largely abandoned mining area above the city of Boulder. It was there, during the following decades, that they would raise their five children (ibid: 3).

At the beginning of his career (during the fifties), Brakhage began making films such as *Interim* (1951), and *Unglassed Windows Cast a Terrible Reflection* (1952), that were explorations of psychological dramas. But his filmmaking took a different turn with his film *Anticipation of the Night* (1957). This film, considered to be a key work in his filmmaking, functioned as a “diary” in which Brakhage recorded the events of his life and his feelings, and is the first one where, according to Marjorie Keller (1986), childhood appears as “a major trope” (ibid: 181). *Anticipation of the Night*, was considered by P. Adams Sitney, as being the full articulation, in film, of a “first person lyric vision” (Sitney 1974: 180 in James 2005: 9). The lyrical film “postulates the filmmaker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film” (Sitney 1974: 180 in James 2005: 10). Brakhage’s films reflected his own life and existential questionings. Another important film made by Brakhage is *Dog Star Man* (1964-1966). Made at the beginning of his marriage to Jane Collom, it corresponded to a period of time when they were living with Jane’s parents in the mountains of Colorado. In it, Brakhage refined the various filmmaking and editing techniques that are so characteristic of his work, such as hand-held camera work, painting directly onto celluloid, fast cutting, in-camera editing, scratching on film and the use of multiple exposures.

In 1958, Jane became pregnant with their first child. Brakhage filmed her pregnancy and the home birth. With this footage he edited *Window Water Baby Moving*



(1959) another of his best-known films. In it the moment of the child's birth is mimicked in the intensive camera work and later editing structure. The filmmaker's idea was to edit it in such a way that the birth of a human being was paralleled with the birth of a film. Being one of the first films ever to represent childbirth, this film became quite controversial even for the filmmaking community (Mekas, J. in James 2005: 107).



Figure 3: Stills from "Window Water Baby Moving" (1959) by Stan Brakhage

By the end of the fifties, Brakhage had begun to regularly film his children and daily family life, and continued to do so for almost three decades. According to Marjorie Keller, who wrote about Brakhage's representation of childhood in film, his obsessive filming of his daily life has given us one of the most complete and intimate histories of family life on film (Keller 1986: 180). Why was he so interested in filming his family? Brakhage claimed that the observation and filming of his family life and children was a process of self-discovery, and a way to gather material to reflect upon the 'epic themes' that obsessed him such as "birth, death, sex and the search for God" (Brakhage in James 2005: 3). His vision was to bring to the public what he considered to be the imagery and structures that corresponded to "a psychic universality" as surrealist film

had done” (Keller 1986: 183) expanding such imagery, by including and exploring the domestic life and childhood (ibid).

Brakhage read a wide range of American literature and also wrote extensively about his own work. He particularly appreciated the American poets Gertrude Stein, Charles Olson, Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound (James D. 2003: 242). The strong influence of poetry in his filmmaking was analysed by P. Adams Sitney in his book dedicated to American experimental filmmakers, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (1974 [2002]). Regarding Brakhage’s own writing, his essay *Metaphors on Vision* (1963) stands out as a seminal text for his subsequent work. Written between 1958 and 1963, it covers a period when he produced many of his key works. *Metaphors on Vision* reflects upon his lifelong interest in exploring different forms of raw perception including childhood vision:

“Imagine an eye unrulred by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye?” (Brakhage 1963 in Sitney 1978: 120)

One of Brakhage’s major life projects was to make, through the use of film, an exhaustive investigation of vision as a thinking process. This investigation included various types of vision such as hypnagogic vision, phosphenes, and other forms of closed eye vision, childhood vision and in a later phase of his life, even vision’s social aspect what he called the “shared societal sight”, as he commented to Pip Chodorov in his last interview (Brakhage 2003: in Chodorov 2008: 171). David E. James, P. Adams Sitney, Phil Solommon, Fred Camper, Marie Nesthus, Marjorie Keller, Marilyn Brakhage and R. Bruce Elder are some of the most important scholars who have analysed the immense volume of Brakhage’s work. Their various perspectives have given us innumerable details and critical insights into his lifelong investigation of

perception and the personal film, declaring him one of the most influential experimental filmmakers of the 20th century.

### *Childhood representation in Brakhage's work*

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As I mentioned previously, because Brakhage's films have followed the life of his family and children for many years, they are considered to be some of the most interesting and extensive representations of childhood ever created within the context of experimental film. Brakhage obsessively filmed his five children over the years: as babies, toddlers, school children and teenagers. Later in his life he also filmed his grandchildren, providing us, in his numerous films, with twenty years of detailed representations of childhood. Examples of his films include *Scenes From Under Childhood* (1967-1970); *The Sincerity Series* (*Sincerity I* (1973); *Sincerity II* (1975); *Sincerity III* (1978); *Sincerity IV* (1980); *Sincerity V* (1980), *The Weir-Falcon Saga* (1970); and many more short films. His films, as he said in an interview to Scott MacDonald, "were integrally involved with family living, with the children growing up, with our immediate natural surroundings and the life within that house" (Brakhage: 1997 in MacDonald 2005: 81). Scholar and filmmaker, Marjorie Keller, dedicated a chapter of her book, *The Untutored Eye - Childhood in the Films of Cocteau, Cornell and Brakhage* (1986), to his unique work. According to Keller, it was his privileged condition of being a parent, and his constant use of the theme of childhood throughout his career, that made him approach childhood in such a rich and extensive way. She writes: "At almost every juncture in his prolific career, he calls upon childhood to represent an aspect of film theory, perception, artistic creation, universal history or autobiography. Childhood represents the romantic self and the other. The child is a being and a metaphor; he is present and remembered; he is formed by society and in

turn forms society; he is the most literal and the most allegorical of creatures” (ibid: 179).

What is interesting in Brakhage’s work, and highly relevant to the context of my practice-based research, is that, due to his long interest in filming his children over so many years, his representations and ideas relating to the concept of childhood changed considerably. These shifted from an initial romantic idealization of childhood to the elaboration of an analytical stance, which would later lead him on to demythologize childhood (Keller 1986: 181). Keller attributes these changes to his close contact with his children on a daily basis, and the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis, even though she decides not to “emphasize the psychoanalytic methodology” in his films dedicated to childhood (ibid: 16). In her study, Marjorie Keller identifies three different phases in Brakhage’s approach to childhood: the initial phase is exemplified by the films *Song IV* (1964) and *Song IX* (1965), the middle phase by *The Weir-Falcon Saga* (1970), and *Scenes from Under Childhood* (1967-1970), and the final phase by *Murder Psalm* (1980). In this review, I will concentrate on the first two phases identified by Keller, as these were carried out with the physical presence of his children, which was not the case with the last phase.

The first phase coincides with the birth of his children, and the beginning of his career, when he was filled with fantasies and expectations about both. In his films from this phase, he explores play and what he considers to be children’s “superior ways of perception”. The child’s independence is presented very positively, both in his films and his writings (Keller 1986: 180). According to Brakhage, as explained by Marjorie Keller, due to the lack of language children see the world without an understanding of perspective. Therefore he thought they perceived the world differently from adults, and that they were able to see more (ibid: 186). In Brakhage's opinion, as children acquired language and as they grew, they would “see less” because they would “learn” what

was socially acceptable to look at, and how one should look at what one sees. Children would lose their special powers of vision in their “increasing inability to see” (ibid). At this stage it could be said that Brakhage’s romantic conception of childhood coincided with the one conceived by the Enlightenment, as I have described previously. Influenced by those ideals his filmmaking practice thus aimed to investigate the possibilities of an innocent and more expanded vision. To understand childhood in this way was typical of the sixties’ avant-gardes, who thought of childhood “as the site of a spontaneity and uncorrupted vision that was sought as an ideal of visionary cinema” (Russell 1999: 285). In this phase he had an untroubled relationship with children. He believed that children should be able to explore and discover the world without adult intervention and that they were not his property. As he would say: “I am photographing the children given to me to care for; I avoid calling them my children because I do not want to possess them.” (Brakhage 1973 in Keller 1986: 195). On the other hand, his “hands-off” educational method aimed to gain access, through observation and filmmaking, to what children intuitively create. He tried to film them as an observer while “relatively unobserved by the children” (Keller 1986: 200). This is felt, for example, in his film *Song IV* (1964), through camera work that is distanced and slow.

His middle phase moves on from the idealism of his early films. His children are bigger, and conciliating filmmaking and daily life becomes more challenging. How does Brakhage deal with his double role? According to Marjorie Keller, Brakhage made no distinction between art-making and child-rearing. Furthermore, he had no guilt about putting the priorities of art above those of children, or in just using his children’s image as the metaphors of the existential questionings he was pursuing in filmmaking. Keller presents the film *Weir-Falcon Saga* (1970, 30’) as an example of his second phase. In this film, one of his sons becomes sick, and in an uncomfortable sequence, one sees the boy crying while looking at his father, asking for help. As the film continues we

follow the boy through his illness, witnessing the trip to the hospital, the distress of his wife, the tears of the boy, and finally the child's recovery. *Weir-Falcon Saga* is a film that might be hard to watch. Sometimes, one wonders how we're able to see some types of scenes. As Marjorie Keller writes: "Brakhage tests the limits of his father/filmmaker role and finds himself insufficient" (ibid: 209). It is as if, behind his camera, "he is locked out of emotional experiences, condemned by filmmaking to analytical distance" (ibid: 211). Brakhage's analytical distance, have been criticized by many feminist film theorists that argued how "his camera work was intrusive and hostile", symbolising the "phallogentric gaze and the cultural order constructed on it" (James, David E. 2005: 15). In *The Weir-Falcon Saga*, Brakhage's presence behind the camera raises important ethical questions that pinpoint to a basic recognition that one should never forget, which is that "there's a filmmaker behind every scene" (Keller 1986: 209).



Figure 4: Stills from "Weir-Falcon Saga" (1970) by Stan Brakhage

This problematic has been addressed not only in avant-garde film but also in documentary film and Cinema Vérité, as it raises important ethical issues. In the book *Introduction to Documentary* (2001), Bill Nichols alerts us to these questions when describing the observational documentary. He writes about how we must consider the act of observing and filming others. He writes: "Is such an act in and of itself voyeuristic? Does it necessarily place the viewer in a less comfortable position than in

case of a fiction film?" (ibid: 111). Reflecting on the tension between the priority to intervene and the pleasure and compulsion to record, Nichols asks us to reflect on the question "when does the filmmaker have a responsibility to intervene?" (ibid: 112). These responsibilities are evidently even more present when a filmmaker or visual artist is also a parent.

Relocating these questions to the projects reviewed here, I can say that what Brakhage did, by filming children so intensively and over such a long period of time, and in whatever situation, evidently made him cross the boundaries of what were the roles of the parent and of the filmmaker. Adding to this, Brakhage always retained a conscious and total control over his films, which was in accordance with his time, as "in home movies in general at that time, the family patriarch generally operated the camera himself (James 2003: 247). In an interview given to Suranjan Ganguly, commemorating his sixtieth birthday, the filmmaker recognized how he had become conscious of the dangers involved in filming children the way he did: "I now believe that in photographing the children, I was engaging them in a creative process, a trance process that was physically far more demanding than they knew. As a result, their childhoods were distorted in subtle and dangerous ways. I am very aware of this now" (Brakhage 1993 in Ganguly 1993: 142).

But on the other hand, he seemed fascinated by the possibility of transforming the lives of his children through filmmaking, while involving them in a creative process that he described as being close to a trance:

"I'm trying to make a form representative of family living which is a little bit off of this earth. And as such those films sit there hanging in the air. Looking at them you would think that everything was beautiful to those people... People who visited the cabin found it to be small, dark and cold, but in the films the house looks bigger and full of light. And that's because those films were inspired by the children and growing up and having a childhood that was utterly different from mine, and the fact that I could give

that childhood to them. I was translating that over into film emotionally. So people were shocked that from this grubby little cabin came a palace of visions” (ibid: 143).

It was as if Brakhage’s project, about daily family life and childhood representation, was a way to escape the constrictive life of parenthood, and the “strictures of traditional family living” (Keller 1986: 145). Other films from this second phase are *Scenes From Under Childhood*, which consists of four 16mm films made between 1967 and 1970; these are *Scenes from Under Childhood #1* (24’), 1967, *Scenes from Under Childhood #2* (40’), 1969, *Scenes from Under Childhood #3* (25’), 1969, and *Scenes from Under Childhood #4* (45’), 1970. In this project Brakhage tried to represent the way children gradually began to perceive the world from infancy to childhood. This film was edited using years of footage of Brakhage’s children growing up. It was part of a larger utopian film called *The Book of the Film* that was never completed. *The Book of the Film* was supposed to be a 24-hour long film, covering the daily life of the filmmaker’s family, based on footage filmed throughout a large part of his life: an immense autobiography made in 16mm (Sitney 2008: 72). According to Sitney “his observations of his young children would provide the visual material for an allegory of the growth of his mind, as well as stimulate his buried memories.”(ibid)

Bruce Elder, in analyzing *Scenes From Under Childhood*, in his book “*The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson*” (1998) points out that this film was triggered by the birth of Brakhage’s first boy. As the filmmaker aimed to understand and empathize with his son’s inward life as much as he could, he realised he had to remember how he had perceived the world when he, himself, had been a child. So he tried to reactivate, as far as that was possible, the visual mechanisms of his own childhood (Elder 1998: 106). With this in mind Elder refers to how “he strove to see again as he had seen as a child, as in this



way he hoped to understand his own child's fears, delights, exhilarations, and despairs, and enlarge his capacity for having sympathy with children" (ibid).

In 1997 Brakhage gave an interview to Scott MacDonald, where he mentioned how, in this particular series of films, he changed the way he filmed his children. At the onset of the project, Brakhage began by filming his children by "rolling on the floor, and locating the camera at their eye level" as if he was a child himself, but he soon realized that with this strategy, he did not perceive their inner world. He had become, as he would playfully say, a victim of the "Shirley temple" syndrome. He decided, therefore, to film his children from slightly above and looking down at the children, to show that it was an "adult envisionement" (Brakhage 1997 in MacDonald 2005: 85).

From the many years of footage of his children, Brakhage produced the four parts of *Scenes from under childhood*, organizing them chronologically since his main goal was to show the progressive development of his children through representing "their changing attitudes and visions of the world" (Brakhage in Mac Donald 2003: 8).



Figure 5: Stills from "Scenes from under childhood part 1" (1967) by Stan Brakhage

Throughout the four sections of the film, Brakhage edited various images of his children, that progressed from the abstract to the very literal, that were subsequently

edited interspersed with fields of color. Likewise, in Sections 1 and 2, he separated a variety of colors within an overall reddish field. This field is an attempt to imagine the environment of the uterus, and how the fetus hears and sees. In Section 1, one begins by seeing a blurred and fuzzy image of a baby, and once in a while photographs of Brakhage as a child, and quick frames of the floor and furniture. Sections 2, 3 and 4 continue to progressively depict the children investigating and adventuring into their immediate surroundings, by showing objects like a faucet, a tube of toothpaste or a washbasin. If in Section 2, red is still the dominant color, blue and green tones are the dominant ones in Section 3 and 4. In the fourth part there is widespread use of color, which enunciates an increasing capability of color recognition, as well as sequences showing a city, a baseball game, or an airplane toy. These scenes suggest, according to Brakhage, the larger world (Brakhage 1997 in MacDonald 2005: 83). By the end of Section 4, there is a scene where two of his children play with toys such as cars, pushing them against their penises. Brakhage interpreted this scene as a metaphor of “a transition to adult empowerment, both physically and mechanically” considering it to be “a closure appropriate to Scenes from Under Childhood” (ibid).



Figure 6: Stills from "Scenes from under childhood part 4" by Stan Brakhage

In this project, Brakhage insisted upon demythologizing romantic stereotypes of childhood, as he had by now shifted away from the romantic ideals he held in his first series of films. Brakhage now thought that childhood was a “gruesome period” where children were in a state of almost constant terror, mixed with hysterical happiness which can become terrifying in an instant” (ibid: 86). Gradually he began to realize that his project dealt more with himself and his own memories of childhood than with his children’s childhood. He says: “The main ambition of this project was to give a sensation of “time travel, as if drawing from the inside of my brain the styles and qualities of life of my growing-up period” (Brakhage 1997 in MacDonald 2005: 83). He described his own childhood as “wretched”, just as “everyone’s childhood is” (Brakhage 2003 in Chodorov 2008: 165).

Brakhage’s representations of his children in his second phase thus shifted away from the very idealistic vision of childhood of the first phase. His vision of childhood became subsequently increasingly tainted with disappointment, particularly in his third and final approach to childhood representation that occurred when his children were fully grown.

It is interesting to see how Brakhage changed his approach to what childhood meant during the course of his life. His filmmaking clearly acknowledges how childhood is a concept that is constantly being reconstructed as time, people and experiences occur. Brakhage provided us with a complex view of childhood, which was only possible, I believe, because of his lengthy artistic engagement with his children, and because he was a parent. Despite that, his use of his children in his films throughout his career, was mainly triggered by his own continuous self explorations (Keller 1986: 180). In his films children remained always inseparable from one another and from their parents, as they just served to perpetuate the filmmakers own traits (ibid: 228). Later in his life Brakhage was conscious of this fact, saying that his children didn’t

recognize themselves (i.e. the emotional atmosphere of their childhood) in the films he had made about them. Brakhage says: "They are not remembering their childhood the way I was imagining it. The films confront them with my feelings about my own development, which they are only the occasion for." (Brakhage 1997 in MacDonald 2005: 85)

One could say that Brakhage's films about childhood, represent mainly his own inner world. As Keller writes: "despite his changing stance towards the issue of childhood, the function of it in his films has remained the same. Filmmaking is the means by which, and the family is the context in which, Brakhage can best explore himself." (1986: 229).

#### Childhood and early cinema: The film diaries of Erik Bullot and 'For Daniel' by Ernie Gehr

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Inspired by the Lumière brothers' films, Erik Bullot, who is an experimental filmmaker and a contemporary visual artist, edited a series of film diaries of his son growing up, from 1998 until 2009. A decade earlier, during the early nineties, another experimental filmmaker based in the United States, Ernie Gehr, made "*For Daniel*" (1996), a silent film of his son, assembled between 1992 and 1996. In this film, also inspired by early cinema, such as the Lumière brothers' films, Gehr followed the life of his son, Daniel, from his birth until the age of four. Both projects evoke the "child pictures" that were one of the most popular and commercially successful genres of early film, being a type of film that Noël Burch categorized as part of "the primitive cinema" which are the films made before D.W. Griffith. Noël Burch entitled the cinema done before 1906 as "primitive cinema" because of its formal characteristics. According to Catherine Russell, the term, that did not intend to be derogatory, distinguished early cinema from the "bourgeois" narrative cinema, that took over the film practice (Russell 1998: 53). Burch's use of the term "primitive" was met with criticism though, leading

scholars such as Gunning (1994), to point out how it could be highly misleading (ibid: 102).

Vicki Lebeau, who analyses the genre “Child pictures” in her book, *Childhood and Cinema* (2008), reveals how the image of the infant child appeared on screen at the onset of film, by telling the story of one of the first public appearances of the cinematograph to the public, a few days after Christmas, in a café in Paris (ibid: 21). The program of the day, Lebeau writes, was the film, *Repas de Bébé* (1895), a one minute film, considered to be one of the first that were produced by the Lumière brothers. In it, Auguste Lumière and his wife, cheerfully fed their baby. As cinema began, childhood representation in film made its first appearance, through the hands of the parents.



Figure 7: Stills from “Repas de bébé”(1895) by Lumière Brothers

The “cinematograph” that was invented by the Lumière brothers, was a machine combining a camera and a projector, and that promised wonders. A few decades later, in 1910, the “cinematograph” would be advertised like this: “it will be possible for the octogenarian of 1990 to see himself laughing or crying in his cradle, taking the first tottering steps of his life” (Lebeau 2008: 33). With the cinematograph, and as this advert was predicting, the possibility of recording one’s life from the beginning was now possible. This would change our relationship to memory and our past lives, as well as the way we remember and represent childhood.

Between 1997 and 2009, Erik Bulloot edited four film diaries of his son Felix, strikingly similar to the original “child’s pictures” of early cinema. Bulloot’s silent films, which can be seen as “living” portraits of his son, were recorded with a 16mm Bolex camera and are entitled *Le Calcul du Sujet* (2000) *Oh oh oh!* (2002), *La Belle étoile* (2004), and *Tohu Bohu* (2008). These portray a child looking fixedly at the camera, interrupted by black frames, and sequences of beautiful landscapes of nature. They also show some of Felix’s childhood activities: his drawings, his trips to the seaside, playing the flute, or reading cartoons. The films result from the filmmaker’s process of filming his son in the same way and same places over the course of various years. Felix is thus made to look straight into the lens of the camera, and he is made to run regularly into the same woods. The film portrays him as well playing by the sea, or on their summerhouse balcony. Felix’s mother is sometimes present. As the films progress through time, Felix’s image changes from that of a baby to a 10-year old boy; a changing face, that always looks directly at the spectator with intensity but never smiling. The absence of the smile, distinguishes this films from the photo album that they strongly evoke. Just like the fabricated “smile for the camera”, Felix’s gaze is also staged, as Bulloot directs his son to look directly and seriously into the camera lens.

Bulloot communicates with his son in these films either by directing him, or by recording his own activities as an observer. Hidden behind the camera, he never appears. However we do feel his presence; in the scenes filmed in the woods he is there as a shadow, moving through the landscape, following the running child. This shadow is Bulloot’s only visible presence in the film, which is interpreted by French film critic Emeric de Lastens, as his symbolic presence (2006: 8), whereas Bulloot interprets

his own shadow as his discreet signature which reveals the technological devices and other conditions of filming:

“Through my shadow that appears in the film sometimes, I address the question of the signature. Who is filming? I enjoy it when the filming conditions are manifest. There is nothing natural. Felix looks at the objective, and the games are made to the objective. It is a little family theater. And my shadow participates in this game. I enjoy inscribing my presence in the film as a transitory instance” (Bulot 2006 in De Lastens 2006:15; my translation).

What is the purpose of Bulot’s films? The filmmaker writes in his website that he wanted to make “a portrait of growth” (Bulot 2008; my translation). Human growth is displayed in these films through the trope of the linear and progressive concept of time; this type of time is interrupted by the decision to film Felix in landscapes of nature. The natural landscapes introduce an additional layer of time in the film, a cyclical time, evoked by the passage of the seasons. In his four films we see the same trees either covered with snow during the winter or blossoming during the spring. These landscapes, located in Haute Provence, are the places to which the filmmaker always returns to film during his son’s school holidays. The sense of an idyllic and peaceful childhood is communicated to the spectator. The timeless character of the natural landscapes, and the somewhat old-fashioned clothes the boy is wearing, suggests that the scenes are set in some indeterminate time. The child could come from any time period in history. In an article reflecting on Bulot’s practice, Jacques Aumont comments on Bulot’s use of time: “no narrative, no time period, no words. Nothing but a dive into a timeless instantaneity” (Aumont: 2001).





Figure 7: Stills from “Oh Oh Oh!” (2002) by Erik Bulloet

But growth is not the only goal of this project, as the filmmaker also wanted to explore primitive film: “It was for me a starting point: silent movie, Bolex camera, independence, amateur practice. It was a way to redo the history of film, step by step” (Bulloet [email] Personal communication. 6 February 2011). In his website he also writes how he aimed to find “ the original planes, the first ones, in the arithmetic sense: the ones that can be divided by one, or by themselves.” (Bulloet 2008; my translation). Finally, through personal communication, Bulloet explains that he wanted to make “a film about fatherhood” stating: “I think it is not so frequent in cinema. I don’t have many records of my relationship with my father” ([email] Personal communication. 6 February 2011). However, in these films, his image explicitly suggesting that he is the father of the child portrayed never appears.

This project evokes Stan Brakhage’s filmmaking, as Eric de Lastens mentions, by writing how Bulloet’s film diaries could be read as an “intimate and foundational exploration of the visible that is so much cherished in Brakhage’s work” (De Lastens 2006: 8; my translation). But Bulloet’s working processes differ from those used by



Brakhage. Bulloot says “nothing is natural” and “the games are made on purpose to the camera” (Bulloot 2006 in De Lasten 2006: 15; my translation). Likewise, extreme attention is paid to the composition of the image of the child within the camera frame. When analyzing this aspect, De Lastens writes: “Well prepared and stable plans will focus on a specific action done by the child, that is quite distinct from the circumstantial surroundings of nature and light” (De Lastens 2006: 8; my translation).

The “artificiality” of these films evokes in one way the family album. In a family album, one typically finds the child properly placed and dressed, performing a happy smile for the camera. Photographs of sweet memories are likewise being saved for posterity. But in Bulloot’s films, Felix does not smile. Another interesting aspect present in this project is the question of the audience. To whom are these films made for? The filmmaker considers them to be on the edge of “the documentary and family film” (Bulloot: 2008) since if originally they were “intended as strictly private they gained public recognition in the fields of both documentary and experimental filmmaking” (ibid).

In any case, the degree of intimacy displayed in these films is very discreet. As Jacques Aumont points out, Bulloot’s stance regarding filming intimacy can well be described as: “you never film intimacy better than when not displaying it” (2001; my translation). Their staged character also contradicts the reading of these films as intimate portraits. As Bulloot writes: “I filmed him only during vacations. I directed him. He had to look at the lens. It was my only order. I think he liked to be filmed. For us, it was like a game” ([email] Personal communication. 6 February 2011).

Throughout this game, and his child’s gaze, Bulloot aimed to capture the image of “the first time a human being began walking, standing up, playing with the waves of the sea, drawing, looking at the camera” (Bulloot 2006 in De Lasten 2006:14; my translation). It is precisely because of that first look towards the camera that I suggest

that he aimed to investigate and speculate on the primordial gaze, which is the gaze of the very first spectators looking at moving images 100 years ago.

#### *"For Daniel" by Ernie Gehr*

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Another project that is pertinent to this research is the film *For Daniel* (72 min, 16mm, color, silent), made by American filmmaker Ernie Gehr. Ernie Gehr was born in 1943 and started making films in the Sixties, with a 8mm camera. In his filmmaking, Gehr is interested in exploring the unforeseen and most basic possibilities of the cinematic apparatus, by imposing specific limitations on the way he films. P. Adams Sitney calls Gehr's work 'structuralist filmmaking' and defines structuralism in experimental film as the "prevalence of form and structure over narrative" (Dixon and Foster 2002: 225). When analyzing Gehr's filmmaking, Scott MacDonald points the characteristics of his structuralist filmmaking by writing: "Gehr reminds us that the moving camera is, essentially, a 'room' into which light is admitted through the 'window' of the aperture. This is more than a metaphor; it is a witty encapsulation of the history of a crucial element of the cinematic apparatus." (MacDonald 1990: 11)



Figure 8: Still of film "For Daniel" (1996) by Ernie Gehr

*For Daniel* is a silent film edited in 1996 with footage assembled between 1992 and 1996. To make this film Gehr filmed intensively the daily life of his son, Daniel,

from birth until the age four, acquiring about 20 to 24 hours of footage that was assembled into a 72-minute silent film that shows Daniel growing up. Gehr's project, like Eric Bullo's, was inspired by early cinema such as the Lumière brothers' films (Pipolo 1999), but differs from Bullo's method in that it adopted an observational viewpoint towards its subject. Writing about this film for the *Millenium Film Journal*, Tony Pipolo writes that Gehr was cautious "not to 'formalize' what he was doing. He therefore struggled to film Daniel's activities in such a way to avoid "intruding upon the child's space or draw too much attention to the filmmaking" (ibid). Pipolo also describes how Gehr avoids dramatizing the film through the use of strategies such as zooming or panning. He limits his filmmaking to a single angle from which to film. Another interesting aspect is that he does not crosscut the sequences displaying his son with other kinds of footage, as Bullo does when filming the forest. Finally, and again contrary to Bullo's films, where the mother's presence and his own presence are discreetly evident, Pipolo mentions how Gehr is not interested in articulating or exploring the more symbiotic relationship that occurs between his son and the child's mother or himself. The only allusion to the presence of an adult is through an arm in some of the images.

*For Daniel* is constructed through a limited number of points of views determined by the position of the camera. The film begins by showing an infant asleep, yawning, crying, looking around. Another following sequence is shot from above, revealing Daniel's wonder with the figures of a mobile passing along the upper frame. If in the first part of the film, the infant is unaware and quite uninterested in the camera, later, as a toddler, we see Daniel more consciously looking at it. The camera afterwards distances itself more from its subject, and we feel the limits of the frame, as we watch Daniel crawling, climbing up furniture and moving around. Daniel's movements condition the images we see, due to the fixed camera. At this point Gehr

introduces two or three flashbacks to the infant Daniel, which Pipolo interprets as “moments of nostalgia for a time already lost”. The last sequences show Daniel in a kindergarten, or actively engaging with his parents, but always silently.

When writing about *For Daniel*, P. Adams Sitney says that if Gehr’s subjects are rigorously impersonal, *For Daniel* is the exception to the rule since “it is the portrait of his infant son” (Sitney 2008: 195) and an exception to the way Gehr avoids autobiographical references both in his work and in interviews. Likewise, Sitney comments that, “*For Daniel*, is the most conspicuous exception to his autobiographical reticence” (ibid: 197).

#### *Childhood development and early cinema*

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It is interesting to notice how Bulloet and Gehr’s projects were inspired by the Lumière brothers’ films - both acknowledging their fascination with early cinema. With their projects, the filmmakers claimed that they were looking for the origins and “roots” of cinema, ascribing themselves to the widely spoken experimental film fascination with early cinema. The avant-garde interest in early cinema is explained by scholar Catherine Russell in her book, *Experimental Ethnography, The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (1999). According to Russell, “experimental filmmakers embraced early cinema as an alternative to the narrative realism that came to dominate the institutionalization of cinema” (1999: 18). When specifically addressing structuralist filmmaking, Russell declared: “Structural filmmakers’ preoccupation with early film, was part and parcel of the introspective ‘purification’ of the medium. The stripping away of institutional and narrative codes led numerous filmmakers back to cinema’s origins, where pictorial composition, montage (or the lack thereof), and address might be found in their raw state, uncontaminated by ‘bourgeois’ narrative codes” (ibid: 63). This search for pure cinema is interpreted by Russell as an expression of “the myth of

primitivism as a minimalist film form, representing a historical otherness, similar to the one anthropologists have manifested in their interest for the 'other' of underdeveloped cultures" (ibid: 18). Russell carefully reminds us to acknowledge how the "myth of primitive cinema" is part of a cultural fantasy: "Of course, neither early cinema nor native cultures were free of ideology, and yet the fantasy of other, alternative, cultural forms is an important component of historical imagination." (Ibid: 53)

In both Bullo's and Ernie Gehr's projects, their re-enactment of early cinema, through experimental film, is explored not only by the "form" (the form and structure of the films, and their lack of sound), but also through the exploration of "content": how the child grows. The way childhood is portrayed in these films, as authentic, silent, innocent, natural and unproblematic, and also the way the child is filmed in pastoral or domestic environments, reinforces in both projects a romantic conception of childhood similar to the one invented during the Enlightenment. In addition, when the filmmakers progressively portray their children's growth in a linear way, it is the image of their children that is narrating the progressive and teleological history of cinema. In these projects the filmmakers' choice of using their children to explore early cinema evoke the myth of primitivism within the projects themselves, where the past is nostalgically evoked as being more "pure" and natural than the present (both the past of film and the past of human history).

The idea of the child as "primitive" is still so strong that it has influenced the way childhood is represented today. As visual anthropologist David MacDougall argues, based on his extensive field work on the representation of children in film: "Today children are arguably the last group still stigmatized as incomplete human beings, in need of civilizing" (2006: 142).

According to Russell, the vanguard's interest in early cinema, which was romantically aestheticized as a "cinematic Eden", "ironically reproduces colonial culture

in a modernist film form, enabling a perspective on the primitive as a modernist construction” (1999:18). Extending this thought to the way childhood is depicted in the films reviewed here, one can also say that the romantic visualizations of childhood given by these films, allegorize not only old fashioned models of education that evoke colonialism, but also as subtexts, patriarchal representations of parenthood. In Erik Bullof’s film diaries we see his child looking fixedly into the lens of his Bolex camera, always filmed in the same locations, and for over 10 years; in the case of Ernie Gehr’s project, we feel the presence of a fixed camera that ubiquitously looks at a child all the time, which evokes the closed circuit surveillance camera system. The constant surveillance reminds us of a similar structure: the Panopticon system that Michel Foucault has described as a structure of micro power in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977). The Panopticon is the prison system of vigilance invented by Jeremy Bentham, in which through a circular architectural system of surveillance, just a few guards are able to observe large number of prisoners.

The way Bullof’s and Gehr’s camera films their children suggests also the patriarchal gaze as described by Laura Mulvey in her essay: “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*” (1975). In this seminal essay, Laura Mulvey constructed a theory that explained how cinema offered a possibility for a type of pleasure derived from the act of viewing, described as scopophilic. She writes: “The cinema poses questions of the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking” (ibid: 7). She proposed that this pleasurable structure of seeing was conditioned by the male gaze, set in a “world ordered by sexual imbalance”, making women function as the passive object to be seen: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness”(ibid: 4).

Even though Laura Mulvey's essay is dedicated to an analysis of the pleasure obtained through a patriarchal gaze that looks at women as objects, one can extend her theories to the way children have been represented in cinema and the arts in general. Strikingly, the "to-be-looked-at-ness" that Mulvey describes, evokes the old fashioned educational idea that children were supposed to be "looked at and not spoken to" in the context of the family. That is what happens in the case of the films of Erik Bullof's and Ernie Gehr's, where children are looked at, by the cameras of their parents, but they are not spoken to, as they are filmed in silence.

As seen, it is quite evident in Erik Bullof's and Ernie Gehr's projects that their cinematic gaze is patriarchal and disciplinarian, as it reveals openly the asymmetry of power of the one who is entitled to look and film, and the one who is supposed to obey and be directed. But these are contemporary films that I believe, should not be taken literally. Rather, their portrayals of childhood can be interpreted as allegories, similar to the allegories given by experimental cinema's nostalgic interest in early cinema as a modernist construction. As Russell reminded us: "Looking at early cinema through the lens of the avant-garde offers a kind of visual historiography in which several layers of mediation render 'the primitive'" allegorical" (1999: 18). Transposing these ideas about the myth of primitivism in film to the way the child is represented in Bullof's and Gehr's projects one can say that their films remind us that today, a representation of childhood that is overtly romantic, is instantaneously read and dismantled by many decades of childhood representation. In addition, the type of parenthood these films evoke can also be critically deconstructed. In later projects, Bullof and his son collaborate, filming with mobile phones the cities they travel to. In Gehr's case he considered his film as a gift to his son: "It was essentially made as the title indicates, 'For Daniel'. The work is not in distribution at least until he is 21. At that point I may ask him if he would mind my putting it in general distribution" (Gehr [email] (Personal communication.7 December

2011). Pipolo also mentions how Gehr edited the material according to Daniel's expression of distress, when watching the footage with his father.

One can even question whose childhood these filmmaker's are representing. Asked by email if he considered his films to be autobiographical, Bulot's answer is ambiguous: "Yes and no, of course" (Bulot [email] (Personal communication. 6 February 2011). With his double answer, Bulot problematises one of the most interesting questions about projects representing childhood done by the parents of those children: one of the strongest processes of identification that occur between the parent and the child. These processes of identification were extremely evident in Stan Brakhage's films, as I have mentioned previously.

Leaving unanswered the question whether these films are about the filmmakers' childhood or not, one can nonetheless say that they allegorize, in an exaggerated and overwhelming way, a pattern of looking at children and relating to children, that is disappearing: the pattern of looking through the gaze of the powerful possessor of the camera, which sustains the approach that looking is also disciplining, and at the same time objectifying a totally dependent subject, which, while being looked at, is made to be silent.

### [Other projects](#)

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There are other artistic projects in which artists have followed the lives of their children but in a more short-term way. As examples I can cite American photographer and filmmaker Danny Lyon's black and white film *Born to Film*, (33': 1982) shot in New York and Mexico. In this film, Lyon combines footage of his young son with films shot in the 1930s by Lyon's father, a doctor, who emigrated from Germany. Lyon's film is an intimately autobiographical film. British video-artist, Catherine Elwes, in small video projects such as *Play* (videotape, 4' 1986), *Winter* (videotape, 15', 1987), *Grown Up*



(videotape, 3', 1990), *Sleep* (videotape, 8' 1984), *Myth/There is a Myth* (videotape, 10',1984), also filmed and worked with the representation of her son as a way to explore the subjectivity of motherhood. Additionally, Alfred Guzzetti made a documentary called *Scenes from Childhood* (DVD, 43' 1988). This film, about his son and his friends during their preschool years, is filled with humorous scenes of Guzzetti's son interacting, playing and having dialogues with his friends. All the scenes are filmed as if there was no adult intervention. Another very interesting project is Robert Frank's film *Conversations in Vermont* (16 mm, 29' 1969). In this black and white film, Frank has filmed himself speaking to his two teenage children, while looking at a group of photographs of their childhood. While browsing through the photographs, Frank tries to engage them in a conversation that evokes memories of the peculiar life style the family had lived, considered by Frank, now in his mid-fifties, to be "radical" and "utopian". Frank asks his teenage children questions such as how those photos affected their childhood. What do they remember from it? How do they relate now to each other as siblings and to their father? The filmmaker also questions himself openly whether his "utopian" lifestyle has either distressed his children or been beneficial to their lives. Frank's project echoes the utopian reach of Brakhage's own project, which claimed that the mixing of his professional life with his family life was a way to break the stereotypical paradigms of parenthood and family life. *Conversations in Vermont* introduce a pertinent question in this context, as in the film Robert Frank dialogues self-reflexively with his children, whether the influence of his creative practice, as part of their childhood upbringing, was beneficial or not. But we don't find any answers – his teenage children are not willing to openly talk to the camera! Many more projects could be cited here, as the number of artists working with their children is overwhelming. For reasons of space I have just mentioned some of those most

relevant to my practice-based research, in addition to the four main artists discussed in this and the second chapter.

## Conclusion

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In this chapter, I have analysed the works of filmmakers Stan Brakhage, Erik Bullot and Ernie Gher who made projects representing their children's childhood. The projects reviewed here have all documented, methodically, the lives of their children over many years. In order to represent the children through the paradigm of 'growth', the artists have adopted a linear approach to time. These projects, even though exploring many other issues, such as early cinema, motherhood, autobiography and childhood vision, also provide us with powerful and intricate "pictures of childhood". According to historian Philippe Ariès' book, "Centuries of Childhood" (1962), childhood as a concept emerged during the Enlightenment, and was defined as a period of time in the life of a human being characterized by a particular set of attributes such as innocence, creativity, and special capabilities such as "higher powers of perception" (Ariès 1962 in Keller 1986: 186). This way of representing and conceptualizing childhood has shaped the way we look at children and represent children up until today. The ideal of Romantic childhood has been so dominant that it is still very influential. With the advent of photography and cinema, the romantic conception of childhood slowly changed, and a new movement of childhood representation appeared, particularly influenced by the works of a group of artist-parents.

The way artist-parents have represented childhood is thus the context of this review. Many artists-parents have worked with their children, but my main interest is with those who did so over many years - through the use of a consistent diaristic methodology. The early cinema of Lumière brothers inspired Erik Bullot and Ernie Gehr to produce diary films recording their children's growth. Stan Brakhage wanted to

represent the development of the vision in children, as part of his life-long investigation on sight and perception, and has also filmed his children for many years. Another interesting and common characteristic present in these projects is how they obliquely represent the dynamic relationship between the artist-parent and the child, through the mediation of art over the course of an extended time. When analysing the projects as “images” of childhood, I argue that if these brought to us new perspectives of the concept of childhood, their organization around the format of the linear time strongly evokes the developmental paradigm that has classically been the major point of view through which childhood has been studied and approached, particularly in the scientific field. Another interesting characteristic of these projects is that even though artists engaged creatively with their children for many years, they never thoroughly explored the inclusion of their children’s subjectivities and points of view. Childhood is therefore pictured in these projects mainly through the adult’s point of view. Artists left out the voices of their own children in their representations of childhood and, consequently, did not embrace new meanings that recent studies have been ascribing to childhood, such as the vision of children as “competent social actors” (James and Prout: 1990) actively engaged and participating in the world that surround them. In the next chapter I will look at the same projects from another angle proposing that they are not only pictorial representations, but also descriptions of childhood, or ‘cultural texts’ (Nichols 1995: 83). Those projects can therefore be understood as experimental ethnographies of childhood, where the artists’ domestic lives, shared with their children, are transformed in a fieldwork for study similar to ethnography.

## Chapter 2 Ethnographies of childhood

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### Introduction

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In the first chapter I reviewed a group of artists who have consistently worked with the representation of their children over a number of years. Each of them has produced time-based art projects using film footage accumulated by documenting their own children's lives over a lengthy period of time.

This footage has been edited and organised chronologically in a diary format. The diary, structured around a linear temporality, has served as a chart via which they have represented their children's growth. These projects could be seen as producing visual representations of 'childhood' as a cultural concept, according to the developmental paradigm.

In this chapter I aim to take a step forward by looking more closely, and from another angle, at the same projects. I therefore propose that these projects are not only pictorial representations, but also descriptions of childhood. What I mean by descriptions is that the projects provide us with conceptualizations of "childhood" as an abstract concept that reinforce some of childhood's most powerful mythologies.

I will then present the time-based installation, *Post Partum Document (PPD)*, by conceptual artist, Mary Kelly, which relies precisely on an appropriation of the methodologies of ethnography to the artistic field. In *PPD*, Kelly documents the life of her son, chronologically, since his birth up until he is six years old, in order to investigate what it signifies to be a mother. Mary Kelly's time-based installation, *Post Partum Document (PPD)*, is also the only project described in this review that explores the inter-subjective relationship between a mother and a child. Even though she doesn't use film directly, Kelly's project is highly influenced by filmic language, and has been interpreted by Juli Carson as a "translation of the 'diegetic' space" (2011: 78). *PPD* consists of seven documents, constructed from 135 individual pieces, that

assemble together a collection of memorabilia from the artist's son's childhood, as well as excerpts from her written diary reflecting on her motherhood experience and on the development of her son. Kelly appropriates anthropological and linguistic methodologies, in order to categorize and interpret those elements. Descriptions of the various phases of childhood development are integral to the installation.

One can read these projects, taken as descriptions of childhood or 'cultural texts' (Nichols 1995: 83), as experimental ethnographies of childhood in which the artists' domestic lives, shared with their children, are their fieldwork for study. Over this chapter I will analyze the aforementioned projects as experimental ethnographies of childhood, before focusing on the artists' approaches to their fieldwork practice.

The term, "experimental ethnography", was first used to describe experimental forms of written ethnography that began to circulate in post colonial anthropological theory as a way of "referring to discourse that circumvents the empiricism and objectivity conventionally linked to ethnography" (Russell 1999: xi). Catherine Russell's book, *Experimental Ethnography: the Work of Film in the Age of Video* (1999), proposes that experimental ethnography in film results from the interpenetration of experimental film and ethnographic film work, in which "cultural critique is combined with experiments in textual form" (ibid: xii). Traditionally, ethnographic film implied a commitment to objectivity in which the role of film was principally to "provide empirical evidence" (ibid: 10). According to Russell, to compartmentalize experimental film, and ethnographic film, into two separate, autonomous categories became under challenge by the emergence, during the eighties, of a new type of film and video making. Her book proposes that experimental ethnography in film is not a new category of film practice, but a "methodological incursion of aesthetics on cultural representation" (ibid: xi).

Since three of the projects mentioned above use film as a medium, they can be read as experimental ethnographies, and, in my opinion, this category can also be extended to the work of Mary Kelly as it is markedly cinematic, albeit presented as a conceptual installation. When reading the projects as experimental ethnographies, what are the major axes along which these projects are structured? First there is the strong presence of the artist's viewpoint in what I consider an auto-ethnographical process. Artists have used the documentation of their shared lives with their children to represent childhood growth from the standpoint of their own subjectivities. Their projects can thus be read as autoethnographies. Carolyn Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography, which first emerged as a written practice, as "autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history and ethnographic explanation" (Ellis 2004: 38). According to Russell (1999), diary films can be seen as autoethnographies, and are a form of experimental ethnography in film (ibid: 279).

The second major axis structuring these projects is the use of linear time as a way to describe the progressive growth of children occurring in pastoral and domestic environments. I shall interpret the use of pastoral set-ups and a linear time to represent childhood, according to the salvage/pastoral paradigm, a paradigm that was mostly present in early ethnographical texts, as described by James Clifford in his essay "*On Ethnographical Allegory*" (1986).

Clifford described the salvage paradigm as a "cyclic cultural pattern of looking back into the past as a move that is searching for a place 'where authentic social and natural contacts were once possible'" (1986: 113). In his essay, Clifford used Raymond Williams' text in *The Country and the City* (1973) to show how the structure enacted by the salvage paradigm, is located within a long western tradition of the pastoral. According to Clifford, "the most problematic and politically charged aspect of this

“pastoral” evocation, is its relentless placement of others in a present-becoming-past” (ibid: 115).

The salvage/pastoral set up evokes the myth of primitivism. One needs to be aware though, how the salvage paradigm should be understood within the framework of allegory. In the aforementioned essays, Clifford explained how ethnographic texts are inescapably allegorical: “Allegory prompts us to say of any cultural description not ‘this represents, or symbolizes, that’ but rather, ‘this is a (morally charged) *story* about that” (1986: 100). He also mentions how the allegory of “salvage,” is enacted in the act of ethnographic writing itself, as a result of the transport of oral-discursive experience to text. Viewed from this point of view, it is as if the ethnographer is saving vanishing cultures, even though nowadays, as Clifford states, this is not the case anymore, if it ever was like this.

When interpreting the four projects, reviewed here, as experimental ethnographies, one can see how they allude to the myth of primitivism, in which children’s growing bodies function as allegories of the primitive subject. Evidently, artists’ conceptualizations of childhood need to be interpreted as an allegory with multiple meanings that are, ultimately, a fantasy. What are those other multiple meanings? In my opinion, the use of a linear time in these projects can be interpreted as an allegory of the colonial gaze. This type of gaze is reinforced in these projects due to the context of parenthood, wherein the parent can be seen as an allegory of the ‘coloniser’. To do so I cite C. Castañeda’s book *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (2002). Castañeda describes how recent studies have begun to link a figuration of the child, through the lens of development, which emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific discourse, to colonialism. She cites the work of post-colonial literary theorist Jo-Ann Wallace (1994). Applying Castañeda’s thought to the context of the reviewed projects, I propose that these projects evoke a type of childhood figuration that allegorizes the

colonialist model of the developmental paradigm. According to Castaneda, the developmental paradigm has contributed to the “children’s subjection in specific times and places” (Castañeda 2003: 43), and the child’s figuration as a developing body has “extended beyond use of the child as metaphor to effectively influence children’s lives more directly” (ibid).

To conclude, I propose that even though a figuration of the child through the pastoral paradigm and developmental paradigm is one of the most classical and widespread constructions of childhood, it excludes other possibilities of representing childhood due to its construction of time, which according to Prout either theorises and represents children in terms of a past time or in terms of a projected future time or in a timeless mythical state of innocence (Prout 1990 in Castañeda 2003: 43).

The second part of this chapter will focus on the kinds of strategies the artists have used to relate to their ‘objects of study’ (their children) in their fieldwork. As described above, the artists gathered footage of their children through long processes of detached observation, using the media of photography, film and writing in a way similar to the classical ethnographical participant-observation methodology pioneered by Branislav Malinowski (1922). I read the artists’ appropriation of fieldwork ethnographical methodologies through the lens of Hal Foster’s essay, *The Artist as an Ethnographer* (1996). In his article, Foster describes the “ethnographic turn in contemporary art” (ibid: 184) and the particularities of artists working as “ethnographers” warning us of the artists’ danger of representing the ‘other’ re-enacting the myth of primitivism. He also differentiates artistic ethnographic practice, given the artists’ use of the aesthetic aspect. According to Hal Foster, artists’ “aestheticisation of the other” diminishes the political impact of the art project by means of a process which locates the political in a place that is “always elsewhere” (ibid: 173). In his article, Foster based his analysis on a number of quasi-anthropological art projects, resulting



from a context that is very different from the projects reviewed here. Foster did mention though the “feminist mappings” of artists like Mary Kelly and Silvia Kolbowski, which are more similar to my own context. On the feminist premise that “the personal is political”, I will therefore review the projects present in this context, which have emerged from an intimate and personal sphere of practice, through Foster’s ideas.

As described previously, over a number of years, artists used a kind of “ethnographic” fieldwork practice to develop their projects by documenting the lives of their children, with the aim of producing art objects or art films about childhood. In order to do so, artists observed their children, took notes about their lives, photographed them, recorded them and directed them into posing for the camera regularly over extended periods of time. It could be said that, due to the way they operated in their fieldwork practices, artists never realized that they were working with someone else who had a particular subjectivity. Artists ‘aestheticised’ their subjects, by subjecting them to a regular and consistent practice of gathering documentation of their lives without acknowledging their voices and points of view. I propose that this happens because of the children’s young ages when the projects began and arises from the strong identification processes that occur during parenthood. These identification processes can also be interpreted as reflecting an ongoing trend in western culture, which finds the ‘place’ of childhood hard to understand. When artists identify strongly with their children they slant their projects to their own adult’s viewpoint. How can we address the problems referred to previously in order to produce other kinds of representations of childhood, those that are more relational and inclusive of children’s voices?

Bearing in mind the aforementioned criticism, in the last part of the chapter I propose that another approach to fieldwork is desirable, one that enhances the child’s active voice in the project. The appropriation, to the artistic context of relational

ethnography methodologies that are based on participation and collaboration, can help to achieve such an active voice. According to Gail Smith, relational ethnography “includes degrees of collaboration, co-creation and discussion with others in producing research into relational activities” (Simon 2013: 01). Another possibility is to invert the linear temporality so prevalent in developmental approaches to childhood representation. Aiming to represent childhood from these standpoints can be an exciting way to seek new possibilities for working with children, that will be more inclusive of both children and adults’ voices and therefore productive of alternative views of childhood.

Taking into consideration these new insights, I will then analyse the fieldwork practice and writings of the visual anthropologist, David MacDougall, who has worked with children through filmmaking for many years. I will particularly look at his five-film project entitled, *The Doon School Quintet* (2003), made with footage from a two-year stay at a boarding school located in India. He is neither an artist, nor a parent filmmaker working with his own children, and his approach was mainly observational, but his effort to include children’s points of view, by encouraging their dialogue, can be an inspiring way to work out alternative and more inclusive ways to relate to children in art projects. MacDougall’s approach to time is also refreshing. The way he edited his films as a “three dimensional” cluster, avoided the chronological sequence; each film revisited the same moments happening in the children’s lives, through different perspectives.

## 1. Doing ethnographies of childhood

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When Mary Catherine Bateson was born, in 1939, the only daughter of the famous anthropologists, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, her parents decided to

film her birth. For several years thereafter, they continued to film her, and documented her life extensively. Their daughter's childhood became their fieldwork. Considered to be one of the first Benjamin Spock babies, Mary Catherine used to say that her life was "one of the best-documented childhoods in the United States" (Bateson, M.C. 1984: 30).

Over the course of history one can find various examples of parents, scientists, doctors and psychoanalysts who have used their own children as study objects when trying to observe and describe childhood. Charles Darwin kept a diary about his first son during his first three years of life. His observations enabled him to write an article entitled, *A Biographical Sketch of an Infant*, published in the journal, *Mind*, in June 1877. Melanie Klein, Terry B. Brazelton and Jean Piaget have all observed and described their children in their works. They accomplished this through close and 'objective' observation, recorded in written diaries or in medical/psychoanalytical reports. These notes served as the basis that led them to develop theories about child psychology and development.

We may say that when artist-parents document their children's lives regularly, they engage in a process similar to the one undertaken by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead. But the difference is that artists do it through artistic practice. Over the years of their practice these artists acted as if they were "ethnographers", with their fieldwork being their own domestic lives and own children.

#### [Mary Kelly's Post Partum Document - childhood and motherhood](#)

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*Post Partum Document* (1973-1979) is a famous conceptual installation about motherhood done by artist Mary Kelly, which can also be interpreted as approaching the representation of childhood. In *Post Partum Document (PPD)*, conceptual artist Mary Kelly quite openly appropriates to the artistic context, the methodologies of

ethnography. Even though PPD is an installation, it is relevant to my own context, as it is a time-based project – it is considered to be, according to Carson, a “translation of the ‘diegetic’ space – the temporal and spatial movement of narrative in film” (2011: 78). I consider Kelly’s project to be of immense importance to my own research because it is the only project reviewed in this thesis that represents childhood through an analysis of the inter-subjective relationship of motherhood.

Mary Kelly is an American conceptual artist born in 1941. In her art practice, through installations, Kelly addresses questions of sexuality, identity and historical memory. She also writes about her work, as writing is one of the major components of her artistic practice, and she openly acknowledges the influence and incorporation in her artistic work, of various theoretical discourses, particularly feminism and psychoanalysis.

During the sixties, Mary Kelly moved to London, where she joined the women’s movement, which had an important influence in her work. She also joined the Berwick Street Film Collective and founded the Artists’ Union. In 1971, when pregnant, Mary Kelly filmed her body, producing a film installation entitled: *Ante Partum* (1973). After the birth of her son, she made *Bathing Series* (1974), a series of photographs depicting intimate images of her baby having his nails clipped. But it was in *PPD*, made between 1971 and 1978, that she fully explored the inter-subjective and intimate relationship of motherhood. *PPD* is considered to be a key work in the history of conceptual art.

In *PPD*, Kelly reflected and documented her relationship with her son from the day he was born until he was almost six years old. Kelly’s project aimed to be “an on-going process of analysis and visualization of the mother-child relationship” (Kelly 1983: xxiii), and it was carried out and structured under the influence of three discourses: firstly, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, secondly, the feminist

debates addressing motherhood within the women's movement of the seventies in the UK, and thirdly, the concurrent theoretical discourses concerning conceptual art.

Concerning Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theories, Kelly focused her attention on the way these theories had conditioned our construction of gender. In the preface to the book version of PPD, *Post Partum Document* (1983[1999]), Kelly explains how she structured her project according to the concept of the "phallic self", as it had been theoretically explained by Freud's 1914 essay: "*On Narcissism: An introduction*" and by Lacan's 1958 essay "*The Signification of the Phallus*" (Kelly 1999: xxii). Kelly writes: "In having the child, in a sense she has the phallus. So, the loss of the child, is the loss of that symbolic plenitude – more exactly, the ability to represent lack" (Kelly 1999: xx). According to this Freudian concept, as explained by Kelly, the female subject only attained power and fullness - her phallic self – during pregnancy. As the woman gave birth to the child she would progressively lose her status of privilege. In her project, her initial presence as a mother symbolized this central position of a "phallic self". It was from this central position that she, in her precisely structured project, subsequently analysed and tried to visualize the mother child-relationship, and their progressive losses, that, according to Freud, corresponded in women to the castration fears "of losing her loved objects, especially her children" (ibid). Kelly also interpreted and documented her inter-subjective experience through the Lacanian theoretical concepts of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. These concepts were first introduced by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in his essay "*The Mirror Stage as Formative of The Function of the I as Revealed in the Psychoanalytical Experience*" (1949 [1977]). In the book *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (2009) Andrea Liss describes Lacan's "*Imaginary*" as "the space in which the infant lives in the maternal real, before language" (ibid: 24). Likewise the imaginary is the world that includes everything that is noticed by, or imagined by the infant in terms of images, either conscious or

unconscious. Lacan entitled the subsequent stage as the “*Symbolic*”. During the “*Symbolic*” the child will progressively acquire language, and “move into the patriarchal world” (Liss 2009: 24). However, before that stage the child passes through the mirror stage. Lacan described the mirror stage as “the obscure border between the fragmented self and its imagined double, its *imago*” (Lacan 1966 in Liss 2009: 25). Lacan’s conception of the mirror stage was based on child development theories based on the evidence that children aged from about six to eighteen months, at their “*infans* stage”, find “jubilant assumption” looking at their “specular image” (Lacan 1949[1977]: 2).

In *PPD*, Mary Kelly interpreted her son’s progressive growing up process through the lense of Lacanian theory, trying to document and find a language to express it, through her chronological documentation of the various developmental stages of her son, from the moment of their initial symbiotic relationship until what she interpreted as their “final separation”, symbolized by his acquisition of written language skills.

Concerning the Marxist/Feminist debates regarding motherhood occurring during the seventies, Kelly wanted to clarify what were the daily life tasks that characterized motherhood as work. At the same time she tried to uncover the psychological structures that promoted this “sexual division of labor” (Kelly 1999: xxiii). These questions were a current debate in the seventies, in the context of a revolutionary decade that had seen the birth of slogans such as: “The personal is political”.

During this decade, feminism addressed and criticised Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, as these theories sought evidence for the construction of the “female” norm within the patriarchal system.



Figure 9: Photograph from installation and artist book "*Post Partum Document*" by Mary Kelly

The third theoretical influence in *PPD* relates to the 1970s discourses on conceptual art, and its questionings of the functions of representation. Through conceptualism, Kelly investigated how the female body (during the state of motherhood) was usually depicted in art. Kelly wanted to avoid and question not only the common fetishisation of the female body but also the fetishisation of the child. She never showed literal images of herself or her son in her work. She ultimately aimed to question "the fetishistic nature of representation itself" (Kelly 1999: xx).

### *The installation*

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*PPD* consists of seven independent sections. These comprise an introduction and six chronologically organized documents. The complete installation has 135 small units, each of them mixing narrative elements with objects that function as memorabilia. *PPD* was subsequently edited into a book in 1983. The first section is the "*Introduction*": in this section Lacan's diagrams of "inter-subjectivity" have been drawn

on four baby vests that belonged to her son, thereby introducing the work's main motif: inter-subjectivity.

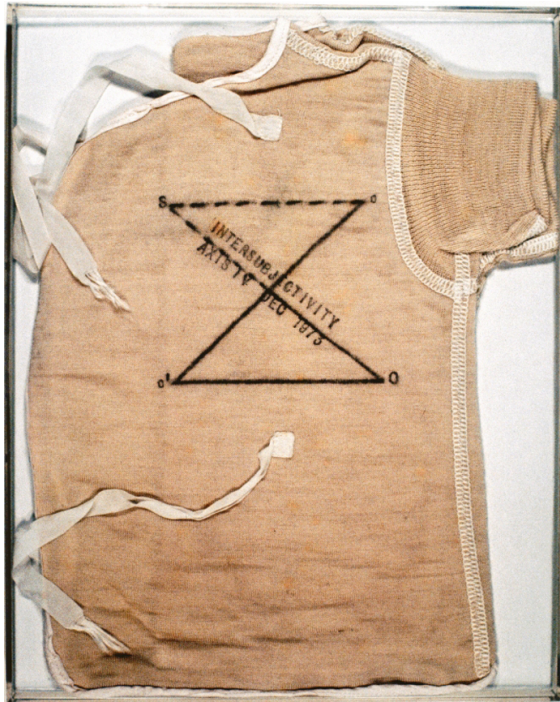


Figure 10: Element from "Post Partum Document: Introduction" by Mary Kelly

In "Document I: *Analysed Fecal Stain and Feeding Charts*" (1974), the artist measured, on a daily basis, over a period of three months, what her infant ate, and registered samples of his stools on diaper liners. These marks are accompanied by a text that records the time the stool was passed, the quantity of stool produced, and what her baby-son had eaten. Each sheet indicates the baby's exact age and is stamped with the date. In "Document II: *Analysed Utterances, Related Speech Events*" (1975), made when Kelly's son was 2 years old, the artist performs the role of the linguist as she makes a linguistic investigation into her son's process of acquisition of verbal language. She listens and analyses her son's developing speech and documents this process through typewritten notes. In "Document III: *Analysed Markings and Diary Perspective Schema*" (1975) Mary Kelly used excerpts of her motherhood diary that describe intimate details of her relationship with her son. She



mixed these with her son's drawings of scribbling and circular shapes made at a nursery school. The parts of her diary were taken from recorded conversations with her son, over a three month period and are represented in three columns: on the left is a record of the child's answers; in the middle is a typed transcription of her thoughts; and on the right are Kelly's handwritten notes. In *"Documentation IV: Transitional Objects, Diary and Diagram"* (1976) she typed excerpts from her journal into pieces of her son's cotton blanket:

"I didn't see K much because of the Brighton show. Now I've noticed he started stuttering. Dr. Spock says it's due to "mother's tenseness or father's discipline" (Kelly 1999: 100).

Above each work there is also a differently shaped miniature newborn's hand imprint in clay, inscribed with various letters. In *"Document V: Classified Specimens, Proportional Diagrams, Statistical Tables, Research and Index"* (1977) the artworks have three sections: the artwork to the left frames various objects such as flowers, leaves, insects, and a snail, all taken from the garden by the boy, and that are offered as gifts to his mother. These are interpreted by Kelly as a sign of the rising interest of the boy for her sexualized body. Each gift is exhibited with a description that mimics nineteenth century museological labeling methods. The middle piece shows an illustration of the "gift" within a Lacanian diagram, and below the illustration, one finds typewritten notes of conversations between Kelly and her son, that demonstrate his interest in his mother's body. Finally, the third artwork shows anatomical illustrations of the woman's reproductive body, again within a Lacanian diagram, as well as a text with medical words aiming to define, scientifically, the female reproductive system.

This long project ends with: *"Document VI: Pre-writing Alphabet, Exergue and Diary"* (1978) undertaken when her son was five and a half years old. The mother-artist

performs here the role of the “ethnographer” engaged in an ethnographical observation of her son’s acquisition of writing and reading skills. She appropriates the image of the Rosetta Stone, reconfiguring in it its original display of three languages (hieroglyphics, Demotic and Greek) with three types of writing: one is her son’s pre-writing, a second is her handwritten analysis on his progress, and the third are typewritten parts from her journal. Mary Kelly’s final document continues with the narrative of the mother-son separations and her own progressive acknowledgment of how her social position, as subordinate to men, is the result of being a mother (Kelly 1999: 169).

*PPD* is a very complex and highly structured project, widely considered to be a key work in terms of artistic practice, since it pioneered “a mode of critical practice that would later influence the 1980’s art production that Kwon classified as discursive” (Carson 2010: 76). In it, Kelly used a very structured methodology in order to investigate what can be considered as her fieldwork of study, which was her work as mother and the principal agent of childcare.

According to Julie Carson, “the manner in which a theorization of ‘the artist as mother’ is performatively worked through” in *PPD*, is what distinguished this project from others (2010: 76). To investigate her fieldwork of study, the artist appropriated the language and methodologies of linguistics, anthropology and psychology. She also appropriated museological methodologies such as the ones used by the Natural History Museum, in order to organize the data obtained. But both strategies are ironic: she aimed to parody both the scientificity of psychological theories, as she thought these undermined women’s position in society, and also museology, as she thought that the iconography of the museum to be “a vast metaphor for the exploration of the mother’s body” (Kelly 1978 in Isaak 1982).

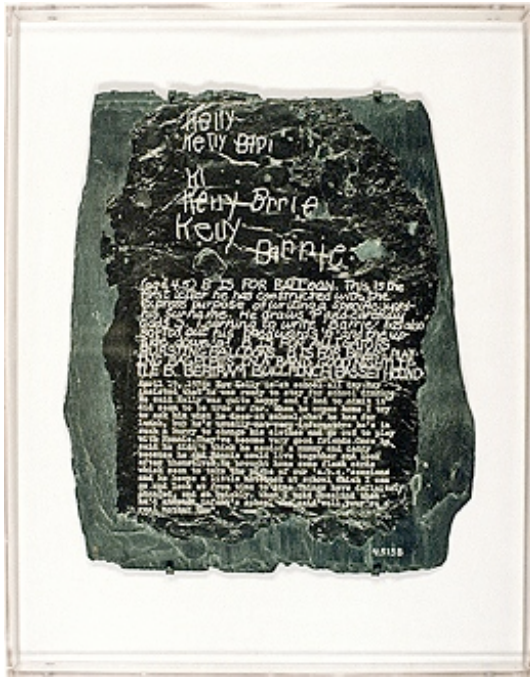


Figure 11: Element from "Post Partum Document: Document VI" by Mary Kelly

With her project, Kelly examined the strategies through which patriarchal discourse operated and produced the subordination of the female subject. Therefore, she “confronted patriarchal culture by taking conceptual art into the personal realm” (Lippard 2010: 25).

#### *Kelly's representation of childhood in PPD*

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Even though *PPD* is a project about motherhood, it can also be analyzed through the perspective of its representation of childhood. One can look at it in two ways: firstly through Kelly's attempts to access her childhood memories in order to understand and represent her own childhood, especially the way she was “constructed” as a female subject, and secondly, through the explicit depiction of her son's growth and development until he is almost six years old.

As explained previously, Kelly tried to visualize and interpret her childhood memories through Lacanian theory. In an essay published in *Rereading PPD*, Griselda Pollock (1998), tries to explain *PPD*'s complex display of inter-subjective memories:

"I suggest that there are at least three spectral 'bodies' haunting the Post-Partum Document. Theoretically there is the mother's body. This is indexed by the child that is now an other to it, lost again in weaning and all the other separations the Document tracks and re-inflicts. There is the maternal subject's mother's body that is registered in the fantasies she projects around the child who is also, at that moment, herself as child by means of transitivity and transference. There is the body of the child, the progressively lost object becomes the fetish of a repetition, a restaging of loss but now from the point of view of the enunciating subject. But no body is present at either the level of image or as object. All these corporeal fantasies are signified by trace and by metaphor and a complex set of displacements and condensations ..." (Pollock 1999: 252).

According to Griselda Pollock, it is through this complex memory process that Kelly looks for the memories of herself as a child, while representing the childhood of her son. The way she represents her son's childhood is through an extremely detailed and pseudo-scientific depiction of his developmental stages. In *PPD*, Kelly looks at her son as an "ethnographer" or "child-psychologist" might, observing and describing him, and attempting to be as objective as possible. Her process is precisely the same as the one she uses to analyse herself as a mother. But the difference is that her son is taken as a primitive subject that is under the scientific scrutiny of his own mother. As Lucy Lippard states: "One of the most interesting aspects of *PPD* relates to Kelly's image of the child as "primitive", the child's mind as a microcosm of a primal society to be deciphered and then colonized by another social group - mothers, adults" (Lippard 1982 in Kelly 1999: xii).

Her objective and analytical approach is "softened", now and again, by the personal reflections contained in snippets of her written diary. Of relevance to my research is the way she relates (artistically) to her son. It is as if she is an anthropologist or linguist, collecting data with the aim of analyzing it and charting his progressive development. This is, of course, done intentionally. By placing science and

psychoanalysis into the context of art practice, in an assumed “parody”, Kelly reveals in *PPD* the hidden strategies of patriarchal discourses, which, as she mentions are the ones responsible for the subordination of the female subject. In my opinion, *PPD* also displays the way the child is subjected to patriarchal discourses and processes of education similar to the ones enforced by colonialism towards the colonial subject.

I consider Mary Kelly’s contribution to be immense, as she revealed what should be deconstructed and surpassed in order to produce new approaches to the subject. Her project evidenced how to deconstruct established discourses, such as the ones of the female subjectivity, and also, in my opinion, the notion of “childhood” as a developing primitive body in need of civilization. It has therefore empowered, precisely due to that deconstruction, the search for alternative approaches to childhood representation. The striking similarity between Kelly’s work and my own work is her search for the memories of herself as a child, whilst simultaneously representing the childhood of her son. This is also a crucial aspect of my own work, as will be explained later.

### [Experimental Ethnographies of Childhood](#)

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The projects analysed in the previous chapter were all accomplished using the media of film (except Mary Kelly’s, which is a time based installation); read as “cultural texts” (Nichols 1995: 83) the projects can be interpreted as experimental ethnographies, addressing the cultural concept of childhood.

The term experimental ethnography was first used to describe experimental forms of written ethnography. Ethnography emerged as an anthropological method during the 1900s, aiming to explore, study and describe the lives of people and their points of view. During the 1980s ethnography was subject to intense criticism, as summarized in the influential book *Writing Culture (1986)*, edited by James Clifford and

George Marcus. This book set out the possibility of viewing ethnographies as constructed narratives, like 'fictions' (Pink 2008: 10). The word 'fiction' does not mean that ethnographies are false or untrue, but rather that they are descriptions "that could just tell part of the story" (Clifford 1986: 6). According to Russell, written forms of experimental ethnography began to circulate in postcolonial anthropological theory as a way of "referring to discourse that circumvents the empiricism and objectivity conventionally linked to ethnography" (ibid: xi). Sara Pink also mentions how this understanding of ethnography, as fiction, corresponds to a postmodern way of interpreting the world in which the ethnographic text is just "a subjective construction, a 'fiction' that represents only the ethnographer's version of a reality, rather than an empirical truth" (Pink 2008: 23). To reflect upon the researcher's own subjectivity became particularly important since "if the researcher is the channel through which all ethnographic knowledge is produced and represented, then the only way reality and representation can interpenetrate in ethnographic work is through the ethnographer's textual constructions of 'ethnographic fictions'" (Pink 2007: 24). Reality is not fixed, objective, or easily described, but something that is only known "as it is experienced by individuals" (ibid).

From the 1990s onwards, the desire to look for alternative ways to describe and produce ethnographical knowledge also emerged from the growing field of visual anthropology, which was caught "between the possibility of conceptual advances and the necessity to attain to the positivist scientific tradition" (MacDougall 2006: 225).

The same decade saw visual artists appropriating the methodologies of anthropology to the context of their projects. Art theorist Hal Foster, describes this phenomenon in an essay entitled *The Artist as an Ethnographer* (1996), considering it a new paradigm occurring in the field of the visual arts. Since then a growing number of studies have acknowledged and described the mutual appropriation of methodologies

in art practice and ethnography (Da Silva and Pink 2004; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2004; Schneider and Wright 2005).

One of such studies is Catherine Russell's book, *Experimental Ethnography: the Work of Film in the Age of Video* (1999). In her book Russell proposes that experimental ethnography in film results from the interpenetration of experimental film and ethnographic film work, in which "cultural critique is combined with experiments in textual form" (1999: xii).

Traditionally, ethnographic film implied a commitment to objectivity. Its links to social science also implied that the role of film was principally to "provide empirical evidence" (ibid: 10). According to Russell, the compartmentalization of experimental film and ethnographic film into two separate, autonomous categories, was challenged by the emergence, during the eighties, of a new type of film and video making. Experimental ethnography in film is therefore defined by Catherine Russell, not as a new category of film practice, but as a "methodological incursion of aesthetics on cultural representation" (ibid: xi). She writes:

"The effect of bringing experimental and ethnographic film together is one of mutual illumination. On the experimental side, ethnography provides a critical framework for shifting the focus from formal concerns to a recognition of avant-garde filmmakers' cultural investment and positioning. On the ethnographic side, the textual innovations that have been developed by experimental filmmakers indicate the ways that "the critique of authenticity" has been played out in cinema" (ibid: xii).

In her book Russell makes a textual analysis of a group of 35 films. She proposes that these hybrid works can be classified as experimental ethnographies, and that they articulate, within themselves, allegorically, the various characteristics of a postmodern world in which 'culture' is represented through many different, fragmented and mediated perspectives (ibid: xii). Among the films she analyses there are several

examples of diary films, which, she says, can be “cast as a form of experimental ethnography” (ibid: 279). As she explains in her last chapter, entitled: *Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self*, these can be seen as autoethnographies in film. She claims that diary filmmaking and the use of autobiographical material in film are means of “politicising the personal” (ibid: xv).

In the projects described in the previous and current chapters, the artists have used both their private lives and domestic worlds to produce cultural representations of the concept of ‘childhood’ as seen from the standpoint of their own subjectivities and artistic investigations. Their projects can be read as autoethnographies.

#### [Autoethnography: Looking at the child as a parent](#)

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Since the 1970s, autoethnography has been described in anthropology as a written ethnographical practice accomplished via the subjective and personal viewpoint of the researcher. One of the earliest accounts of autoethnography was by David Hayano, who described it as a set of issues relating to anthropologists’ studies of their ‘own people’ (1979: 99 in Danahay 1997: 5). For Hayano it is the insider status that marks autoethnography (ibid).

More recently, scholars such as Denzin (1989), Danahay (1997) and Ellis and Bocher (2004), have tried to define and characterise autoethnography; Denzin refers to autoethnography as “a text that blends ethnography and autobiography” (Denzin 1989: 27 in Danahay 1997: 6). Reed-Danahay (1997) defines autoethnography as a method entailing the “incorporation of elements of one’s own life experience when writing about others through biography or ethnography” (ibid: 6). He considers autoethnography as a form of self-narrative that locates the self in a social perspective. Danahay also asserts that it is “both a method and a text, as is the case of ethnography” (ibid: 8). As a text, Denzin pinpoints that autoethnography “does not adopt the ‘objective outsider’



convention of writing common to traditional ethnography” (Denzin 1989: 27 in Danahay 1997: 6). Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, two academics who have been researching autoethnography for a number of decades, define it as “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history and ethnographic explanation” (Ellis 2004: 38). This aspect makes autoethnography “transcend autobiography by connecting the personal to the cultural” (ibid). In their essay, *Communication as Autoethnography* (2006), they write about how autoethnography describes “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles” (ibid: 111). According to Danahay, a positive aspect of autoethnographical texts or works of art is the way they “assert alternative forms of meaning and power from those associated with the dominant, metropolitan culture” (1997: 8).

When mapping the usual themes covered by autoethnographers, Chang (2008) mentions how almost any aspect of one’s life can become a research. Some topics, he says, are “emotive and personal including those conventionally kept private” (ibid: 49-50). Danahay (1997) mentions how autoethnography can be carried out by an anthropologist or a non-anthropologist/ethnographer, as well as an “autobiographer who places the account of his or her life within a story of the social context in which it occurs” (ibid: 9).

Russell broadens the practice of autoethnography to the context of film by analysing personal films done by film and video makers as autoethnographical documents. She states that the ones who are doing autoethnography are those who, while using autobiography, also “understand their personal history to be involved in larger social formations and historical processes” (1999: 276). This adds an extra layer to an autobiographical ‘text’, making it ethnographic because it contributes to a

perspective on “‘identity’ that is now a ‘staging of subjectivity’, a representation of the self as performance” (ibid).

Russell also mentions how autobiography in film and video is “rarely a source of truth and authenticity, but a dispersal of representation, subjectivity, experience and cultural history” (ibid), proposing, therefore, that these films present “fragmented and hybrid identities” which can be seen as forms of “embodied knowledge” and “politics of location” (Nichols 1994 in Russell 1999: 276). Autoethnography, Russell writes, “is a vehicle and a strategy for challenging imposed forms of identity and a way to explore the discursive possibilities of inauthentic subjectivities” (ibid). The films she analyses and puts forward as autoethnographies are diary films, autobiographical films and personal videos. The examples she gives are the diary films of Jonas Mekas, Sadie Benning and George Kuchar, and the essay film of Chris Marker titled *Sans Soleil* (1982). Russell states that these can be seen as essay films (ibid: 277) and that it is precisely the essay as a category, which transforms these films into autoethnographies through the process of “incorporating the ‘I’ of the writer into a commentary on the world that makes no grand scientific or totalising claims but is uncertain, tentative and speculative” (Renov 1989: 4 in Russell 1999: 277).

A common feature Russell identifies as being present in film and video autoethnographies is the subjective first-person voiceover. The author is also present as the one at “the origin of the gaze, and as body image” (ibid: 277). What are the usual themes of autoethnographical films? According to Russell, they are the expression of identity, the diaspora and family stories, such as the re-enactment of an encounter between the filmmaker and his/her parents or grandparents (ibid: 278). Russell also mentions how the generational gap is re-inscribed “across the filmmakers own inscription in technology, and thus, it is precisely an ethnographic distance between the modern and the pre-modern that is dramatized in the encounter” (ibid:

278). Autoethnographical films have a “testimonial, confessional character that evokes authenticity and veracity (ibid: 279). Russell states that this testimonial mode is as if “the authorial subjects offer themselves up for inspection, as anthropological specimen”. But they do so ironically, “mediating their own image and identifying obliquely with the technologies of representation, identifying themselves as film and video makers” (ibid).

One can claim that the projects done by Erik Bullof, Ernie Gehr, Stan Brakhage and Mary Kelly, are autoethnographies. These provide us with representations of the cultural concept of ‘childhood’ through the point of view of parenthood. Since the parents are also artists, they identify with their technologies of representation, at the same time they perform, obliquely, their identities as parents. While Brakhage identifies with his technology in such a profound way that he subjects his personal life and that of his children to that technology (the camera being an ubiquitous presence in his domestic life for various decades), in the case of Gehr and Bullof that identification occurs as filmmakers, who aim to remake the story of early cinema in their projects, by displaying their children’s processes of growing up. Mary Kelly, on the other hand, theorises her motherhood experience through conceptual art and psychoanalysis; discourse not only becomes her site of art practice as it “invades” her daily life.

These projects also explore other forms of identities, or deconstruct established ones, which is one of the attributes of autoethnography. This is evident in the case of Kelly’s and Brakhage’s projects, since both present and challenge their identities as parents in a self-reflecting manner. Bullof and Gehr do the same thing, but more obliquely, when mixing their roles as parents and filmmakers. Hence, when artists relate to their children with the aim of representing them in the context of their parental identities, they displace those identities from the private sphere to the public one.

Parenthood becomes a performance of the artists' self, and the viewpoint through which they represent cultural constructions of childhood.

What is paradoxically interesting is that while their parenthood performances in their art practices challenge and critically deconstruct parenthood, the way they approach childhood representation is by displaying their children abstractly, as passive muted beings, and through a use of time that evokes either the past or the future. It is that linear and progressive time, describing the development of their children, which reinforces, in the projects, a classical conceptualization of childhood through the developmental paradigm. Such a conceptualization also evokes a classical ethnographical paradigm, first described by James Clifford. This paradigm is called the salvage/pastoral paradigm.

#### [The child as the adult's lost 'wholeness': the pastoral paradigm](#)

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The salvage paradigm is a concept, first introduced by James Clifford in the essay, *On Ethnographical Allegory* (1986), as well in the essay "Of Others Peoples, *Beyond The Salvage Paradigm*" (1989). Clifford describes the salvage paradigm - though carefully reminding us of its "old-fashioned ring" (1989: 73) - as a "cyclic cultural pattern of looking back into the past as a move that is searching for a place 'where authentic social and natural contacts were once possible'" (1986: 113). In his essay Clifford uses Raymond Williams' text in *The Country and the City* (1973) to show how the structure enacted by the salvage paradigm, is located within a long western tradition of pastoral. In "*The Country and the City*" Williams traces "the constant re-emergence of a conventionalised pattern of retrospection that laments the loss of a 'good' country, a place where authentic social and natural contacts were once possible" and showed how "the pastoral frequently involves a critical nostalgia, a way to break with the hegemonic, corrupt present, by asserting the reality of a radical

alternative” (Williams 1973 in Clifford 1986: 113-114). That alternative is promised at a ‘natural’ and pure place located in the past. That place is always mourned by each successive period, “producing an unbroken chain of losses leading ultimately to ... Eden “(Clifford 1989: 74). The motivation for proceeding with that search is the Western sensation of a ‘fragmented self’, which, while seeking its wholeness, engages in a permanent search for authenticity. Clifford states that “wholeness by definition becomes a thing of the past (rural, primitive, childlike) accessed only as a fiction, grasped from a stance of incomplete involvement” (1986: 113). The problem of this paradigm is that it produces a “relentless placement of others in a present-becoming-past” (ibid: 115). The salvage/pastoral paradigm thus evokes the myth of primitivism. As Clifford writes: “In a salvage/pastoral set-up, most non-Western peoples are marginal to the advancing world-system. Authenticity in culture or art exists just prior to the present (but not so distant or eroded as to make collection or salvage impossible) “(1989: 74).

In his essays Clifford refers to how ethnographies should be understood within the framework of allegory, writing that: “allegory prompts us to say of any cultural description not ‘this represents, or symbolizes, that’ but rather, ‘this is a (morally charged) *story* about that” (1986: 100). The allegory of "salvage" is implicit in the act of ethnographic writing itself, as a result of the transport of oral-discursive experience to text. Clifford argues that although ethnography will always be allegorical, the impulse to redeem vanishing things persists, and in the words of Benjamin it is "one of the strongest impulses in allegory" (ibid: 119). To resist this impulse one needs to open oneself to “different histories” (ibid) and through a “recognition of allegory” (ibid: 120).

When artists represent their children in silence, surrounded by pastoral environments that bluntly evoke Eden, while gradually growing up, they allude in their descriptions of childhood, to a symbolic figuration of the child as an abstract primitive

being that is innocent, romantic, whole, but isolated from the observing adult, and devoid of agency in their present days. Artists' practices and their final projects evoke the fieldwork practices of the first ethnographers in the history of ethnography. Artists also seem to be fascinated with the idea of salvaging vanishing things, such as the childhood of their children and ultimately their own childhood.

### *The artist-parent as the colonizer*

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Clifford mentions in his essay, *On Ethnographical Allegory (1986)*, Johannes Fabian, another author who reflected on this issue of time provoking otherness in anthropology. Johannes Fabian, *In Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects (1983)* describes how "relationships between parts of the world can be understood as temporal relations and how dispersal in space directly reflects sequences in time" (1983: 12). The most geographically distant was also the most distant in terms of time, i.e. the most primitive. The primitive subject, living far away, though present today, was interpreted and described in anthropological texts as an example of the past history of more 'advanced' civilisations. In Fabian's text this primitive being could also be encountered in the childhood of western adults: "what could be clearer evidence of temporal distancing than placing the Now of the primitive in the Then of the Western adult?" (ibid: 63).

Fabian's concept of "temporal distancing" is used in C. Castañeda's book *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds (2002)* as a framework to understand how the child's figuration as a developing body "has been used in the making of global hierarchies and knowledges" (ibid: 13). Such discourse, she claims, not only situates the primitive that exists presently, in the time of childhood, but also in the child-body: "the child was seen as a bodily theatre where human history could be observed to unfold in the compressed time-span of individual development" (ibid: 13).

Castañeda then mentions the links between this type of figuration of the child and colonialism and cites the work of postcolonial literary theorist Jo-Ann Wallace (1994). Wallace researched the child-figure in British colonial and postcolonial literature; in her words: “it is as ‘primitive’... that ‘the child’ represents to the West our racial as well as our individual past: the child is that ‘ancient piece of history’ whose presence has left room... for the parent-child logic of imperialist expansion” (1994:175 in Castañeda 2003: 13).

As I stated earlier, I believe that the art projects presented in the previous chapter, undertaken in *the context of parenthood*, present a conceptualization of childhood that clearly suggests the ‘pastoral/salvage’ paradigm, due to the use of natural, idyllic or domestic landscapes, as a background to the unfolding of children’s growing up processes. But the artists approach to this kind of representation of their children needs to be interpreted as an allegory that is ultimately a fantasy with multiple meanings.

Russell (1999) discusses the double character of allegory stating that: “Allegory embraces the salvage paradigm as a temporal inscription that renders representation a form of writing, in which meaning is produced as a supplement that is added to the text, not derived from it hermeneutically” (ibid: 6). The recognition and exploration of ethnographic allegory, writes Russell, implies a “foregrounding of the “time machine” of anthropological representation, a discursive production of the Other that may construct an Edenic, pastoral, authentic site of otherness, but only as a fantasy”. (ibid)

Even though the four projects presented here are evidently fantasist allegories – in their projects artists explore early cinema, the development of vision, childhood, motherhood - it is interesting to unpick some other possible allegories. Likewise, when artist-parents choose to represent their children ‘muted’, while growing up in pastoral landscapes, they evoke the “global vision of nineteenth century evolutionism” (Clifford

1989: 73) which ordered the world's various societies "in linear sequence (the standard progression from savage to barbarian to civilized, with various, now arcane, complications" (ibid). Their type of child representation can thus be said to allegorize the 19<sup>th</sup> century use of "the child as a figure of a colonial "other", as Castañeda describes when reviewing literature on childhood and colonialism. In her text, Castañeda explains how a "colonial ordering of the world" had its seeds in the parent/child relationship: "not only has the child-as-primitive represented both the individual and racial past to the West for Wallace, but the unequal child-parent relation in Western Society has also provided a foundation for the colonial/imperialist order" (Castañeda 2003: 14). I therefore propose that the artist-parents observational gaze evokes in the four projects reviewed previously, the colonial gaze, such as the one of early ethnographers, towards "primitive subjects".

There is yet another possible way to interpret the projects presented here which is from the point of view of their technologies of representation. If one takes film and video to be "social and cultural practices even in the context of formal and aesthetic analysis" (Russell 1999: 23), one can say that these technologies were used in the aforementioned projects as social practices of detached observation. These practices not only suggest early colonial ethnographical fieldwork practice, but also old-fashioned models of parenthood, even in the projects from more recent decades, such as those of Ernie Gehr and Erik Bullof.

According to Castañeda one of the sharpest critiques to developmentalism is how it contributed to "children's subjection to specific times and places" (Castañeda 2003: 43). She introduces this criticism by citing James and Prout (1990), who wrote that "time in childhood – children's daily life experiences – has been made secondary to the time of childhood, when children are seen as dependent upon and protected by the adult world" (ibid: 219). They further explain that "the child has been theorised in terms



of a past from which the child will soon develop into the adult: in terms of the projected time of future adulthood; or in a timeless mythical state of innocence, ignorance and purity” (ibid: 221). This type of approach to time is evident in the projects reviewed previously, which were all done via the chronological diary. According to James and Prout “the temporal constructions that have been applied to children in theory and practice have tended to thwart and obscure children’s active participation in the world” (1990: 219 in Castañeda 2003: 43).

Even though I am aware of the allegorical character of these four projects, I claim that the artists’ use of a linear temporality and a pastoral set up to represent their children’s developmental processes, marked their general representations of childhood in such a way, that the artists seemed to have followed, ingenuously, the ethnographical pastoral impulse to redeem vanishing things. They have thus excluded from their descriptions a type of representation of childhood that is more aware of the voices of children, acting as active agents in their present daily lives.

## 2. Ways to approach fieldwork

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I have described above what I consider to be the two main axes structuring the projects of Bullo, Gehr, Kelly and Brakhage as experimental ethnographies of childhood. Those axes are autoethnography and a linear temporality. I shall now focus on questions of fieldwork. Could we say that artists-parents have appropriated to their practice, the methodologies of ethnographic fieldwork?

Fieldwork can be described as the gathering of documentation of a group of people to produce descriptive knowledge. One of the first accounts of fieldwork practice was by Bronislaw Malinowski, in the 1920s, who pioneered a fieldwork method during the several months he spent working in the Trobriand Islands. His method,

known as participant observation, would go on to influence the discipline throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Bill Nichols defines the participant-observation method as one where the researcher lives in the field under study, taking part in the lives of others. This enables him to acquire a “corporeal or visceral feel for what life in a given context is like, and then to reflect upon his experience, using the tools and methods of anthropology and sociology” (Nichols 2004: 115). Visual documentation methods were also included in ethnography from very early on. One such example occurred in the 1920s when Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson used film and photography as documentation processes for their fieldwork practice in Bali. These cultural documentation processes were meant to be as objective as possible, as they were supposed to be governed by an emphasis on veracity with the goal of producing naturalistic documentation of the culture being studied.

Concerning fieldwork, Sarah Pink pointed out how fieldwork has changed over the course of the last few decades, as new areas are being considered as possible sites of fieldwork practice, among them “the domestic interior, which is a domain of interdisciplinary interest” (Pink 2007: 28). At the same time, fieldwork has increasingly included research undertaken with more experimental methodologies for producing ethnographic knowledge.

Returning to the context of the four projects reviewed here, if we interpret as fieldwork practices the artists’ practices of documenting their children’s lives, we can say that the artist-parents have anticipated, in their projects, ethnography’s recent trend of fieldwork in the domestic and private sphere

We can likewise affirm that the artists introduced into their personal arenas the increasingly common trend of artists “acting” as ethnographers, a practice which, as analysed by Hal Foster in his essay *The Artist as an Ethnographer* (1996), occurred

during the 1990s. It is through the lens of Foster's essay that I will read the projects presented previously.

### The artist as ethnographer: aestheticizing the child

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In 1996 Foster published his essay, *The Artist as an Ethnographer*, describing what he deemed a new paradigm in the field of the visual arts - that of the artist appropriating the methodologies of anthropologists and acting as ethnographers. According to Foster, these tendencies were the result of an ambition to reconcile theory and practice through fieldwork. This occurred in a period when both revisionist anthropology and contemporary art practice were realizing their affinities and how these revolve around their mutual negotiation of "textuality – a recognition of the discursive constructions of the real - and a longing for referentiality" (Russell 1999: 22). Foster criticised artists tendencies to act as ethnographers, claiming that with their practice, there was the danger of considering the 'other' as a site of authenticity, re-enacting the primitivist fantasy which had emerged in nineteenth century narratives, and that, according to Foster, still reside residually in discourses like psychoanalysis and disciplines like art history (Foster 1996: 177-178). Referring to the primitivist fantasy, Foster cited Freud:

"(Thus in Totem and Taboo (1913), with its subtitle "Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics", Freud presents the primitive as being 'a well preserved picture of an early stage of our own development'). Again, this association of the primitive and the prehistoric, and/or the pre Oedipal, the other and the unconscious, is the primitivist fantasy" (Foster 1996: 178).

Another problem he identified was that when the other was admired as "playful in representation, subversive of gender, and so on, that may just be a projection of the anthropologist, artist, critic or historian" (ibid: 183). If so, then "an ideal practice might

be projected onto the field of the other, which was then asked to reflect it as if it were not only authentically indigenous but innovatively political” (ibid). But that might lead to a potential trap such as the one of “relocating the space of politics outside the sphere of aesthetics, to an elsewhere loosely labeled the social or the cultural” (ibid).

In his article, Foster based his analysis on a broad variety of examples of art projects, from site-specific work inside institutions, to “quasi-anthropological” projects involving collaboration with local groups, such as the “Project Unité (ibid: 196), that involved a commission of forty installations for the Unité d’Habitation in Firminy (France). Foster criticized the quasi-anthropological scenario of these projects, pointing out that the principles of the ethnographic participant-observer were, more often than not, neither observed nor critiqued, and additionally that there was very little engagement with the communities concerned (ibid: 196). The result of this was that projects could easily drift from collaboration to self-fashioning, and to a “remaking of the other in neo primitivist guise” (ibid: 197).

The art projects reviewed by Foster in his article are, on the whole, quite different from the four projects reviewed previously, which come from the personal and domestic space. He mentioned in his essay though the feminist mappings of artists like Mary Kelly and Silvia Kolbowski, which are closer to my own context. Foster describes Kelly’s project, *Interim* (1984-1989), stating that the artist uses a “polyphonic mix of images and voices to register personal and political positions within the feminist movement” (ibid: 190). In it, Kelly acts and participates “as an indigenous ethnographer of art, theory, teaching, activism, friendship, family, mentorship, aging” (ibid).

How could one read the projects presented in this context, on the feminist premise that “the personal is also political”, and according to the ideas presented in Foster’s article?

First of all, we can say that the artist-parents clearly “acted” as ethnographers in their projects with their children, due to their daily practice of gathering images of their offspring by recording them as detached observers, or by directing them, appropriating the classic ethnographic fieldwork practice. Even though the artists can be said to have applied to their family context, the classical Malinowskian *mise en scène*, they seemed oblivious to the fact that they were altering their children’s daily lives, by exposing them to an aesthetical sphere of practice. The artists were not acting passively in their fieldwork, but rather ‘transforming’ it by making their children regularly participate in their creative practices with the aim of using their children’s images as aesthetic metaphors of the many parallel investigations they were undertaking. Besides this, artist-parents never explored their children’s unique subjectivities. One can therefore say that they relocated the space of politics out of the aesthetic one, falling into the trap Foster warned about in the earlier mentioned essay.

In my opinion, the process of aestheticisation of the subject, becomes ever more evident in art works carried out with children, because artist-parents working with their own children do not establish a clear distinction between ‘themselves’ and ‘their children’ in their art projects. I believe this happens as a result of the highly interdependent and projective relationship inherent to parenthood. The artist parents ‘over-identified’ with their children and thus never felt that they were collaborating with an ‘other’ but rather with their past selves.

Anne Higonnet (1998) has studied the representation of childhood, particularly in the field of photography. When examining photographs taken by parents, she attempted to understand the identification processes so essential to parenting, noting how “there is, arguably, no identification at once more intense and more vexed than the identification a parent feels with her or his child, perhaps especially so in the case of

the mother, whose child begins biologically as a part of herself, and whom she often feeds as an infant with her own body” (ibid: 200).

I suggest that these identification processes, so prevalent in projects where artist-parents represent their children, also reflect a trend in western culture that is consequently reflected in visual practice, which seems to have difficulty understanding what childhood’s ‘place’ is. What are children in relationship to adults: the other, or the same? Quite paradigmatic of this is Leslie Thornton’s quote regarding her film-and-video epic *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1981-1994): “Children are not quite us and not quite other. They are our other. They are becoming us” (Thornton 1989–90 in Russell: 1999: 244).

When reflecting on this quote, geographer Heather Nicholson, who analysed 1970’s home movies, interprets it as a sign of the ambiguity and difficulty of categorising ‘the place’ of childhood:

“The words of Leslie Thornton, a contemporary experimental filmmaker, offer a clue to the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s fascination with children in moving imagery. From an adult’s perspective, children seem to inhabit a different realm where, for a brief time, they do things differently. Yet, the distinctive otherness of childhood sits uneasily within the confines of binary logic: the dichotomies of ‘us’ and ‘them’ impose a sameness that negates the diversity of children’s experiences. A more differentiated vision of childhood must acknowledge that children occupy as diverse a social world as the rest of society” (Nicholson 2001:128).

Recent studies, especially from the field of geography, have introduced the idea that looking at children as ‘other’ for the purpose of research can be useful. The work of Owain Jones is a foremost example; in an essay concerning research about childhood, he explains otherness as follows:

“Otherness, as I will discuss, does not just mean simple separation and unknowability. It is a more subtle idea of the knowable and unknowable, the familiar and the strange, the close

and the distance, being co-present in adult-child relations. (I speak as a parent, as well as an academic, throughout this piece.) The otherness of children is the (more) unknowable reaches of the relationship. To repeat a key point, otherness is not only healthy for children and for child-adult relationships, it is essential to what children are. It should be central to ideas of childhood too” (Jones 2008: 197).

If, when working with your own children, the identification processes are to a certain degree unavoidable, developing a new way of working with children in art practice, anchored in the standpoint that children are “other”, can promote children’s voices and points of view as well as a focus on the present times of their daily lives. Such a standpoint will necessarily have to be fostered by novel and more collaborative approaches to fieldwork practice.

When approaching questions of practice in the book, *Between Art and Anthropology* (2010), Grimshaw, Elspet Owen and Amanda Ravetz emphasise how “questions of practice increasingly came to the fore in the wake of Foster’s article” (2010: 160). Hence “both anthropologists and artists started to recognise that it was in the area of practice, rather than in discourse about artefacts, that their interests converged” (ibid). Focusing also on the question of practice, Schneider and Wright (2006) proposed “‘border crossings’ or appropriative practice whereby artists and anthropologists borrowed techniques and forms from one another” (ibid: 27). Experimenting with these “border-crossings” could thus promote richer and more relational representations of the times and voices of childhood in time-based art practice.

In the book, *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2010), Sarah Pink reviews recent visual projects involving research with children. Pink points out how recent research experiments with novel approaches to fieldwork practice that explore the belief that “children are rational agents actively engaged with the social world around them” (Mizen in Pink 2010: 60). Another project Pink cites is David MacDougall ethnographic

film work with children. Visual anthropologist David MacDougall's work has produced both films and theoretical essays reflecting his practice with children. Even though his films hold the observational standpoint of classical ethnographic filmmaking, I am particularly interested in the way MacDougall "gives voice" to the children he represents, through the use of conversations.

### [Constructing the child through listening: The Doon School Quintet](#)

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MacDougall is a visual anthropologist who, in 1997, began a project, which aimed to study the Doon School, India's most prestigious boys' boarding school, located in Dehradun, Uttarakhand. He wanted the project to research the way the emotions and social interaction of individuals at the school were associated with social aesthetics. What he meant by social aesthetics was "how the school as a small society had developed a particular aesthetic design in its informal daily life and its more formal rituals and institutions" (MacDougall 2006: 97). But as the project developed, an interesting shift occurred: he started becoming more interested in working on a representation of childhood. He became more involved in the lives of the children, and developed specific and friendly relationships with some of them. This project marked MacDougall to such a degree that it made him reconsider his thoughts about childhood and the way he represented and studied childhood through visual anthropology.

The results of this long ethnographic project were five films and a number of essays. The essays titled *Films of Childhood* (2000), *Social Aesthetics and the Doon School* (2005) and *The Doon School Reconsidered* (2005) were published in his book *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses* (2006). The first essay looks at how childhood is represented in fictional and documentary film. What are the biases and usual clichés of childhood representation in film? He writes:



“Children appear in many films, sometimes incidentally, given little more attention than the family dog, sometimes at the centre, carrying on their shoulders all the hopes of the adult world. Yet films have a way of reducing children’s lives to formulas, replacing strangeness and individuality with more comfortable notions of what children could be ” (2006: 67).

In the second essay MacDougall describes the first phase of his project of filming the Doon School, and he reflects upon the possibilities of studying childhood as a way to understand the adult world. Finally, in his last essay *The Doon School Reconsidered* he explains how his early ideas about childhood changed through the process of filming the school’s children. He gradually became more interested in trying to film childhood, attempting to avoid the usual tropes and stereotypes that he had identified in non-fiction films about children, which “seemed to be more patronising than those about adults” (MacDougall 2006: 121). MacDougall criticized the objectification of children in film and the manner whereby “children are often indulged in films, as well as sentimentalised, but they are rarely developed fully as individuals” (ibid).

What he proposed was to pay more attention to children to “show some aspects of childhood that had not been adequately filmed before, or at least show children behaving in a less clichéd way than I had seen in other films” (ibid: 121). His first film was *Doon School Chronicles* (2000), edited with 85 hours of footage recorded over a two-year period. Of the five films, this was the one more focused on the topic of social aesthetics. The second, made with the same footage but edited later, was called *With Morning Hearts* (2001). MacDougall was now more interested in representing the emotional lives of the boys who were just starting their education at the school (ibid: 125). He focused on one particular space of the school, the first year dormitory, and on a particular main protagonist, a 12-year old boy called Karam who struggled to adapt to the new school. In this film, and via Karam’s story, MacDougall expressed his admiration for the way children “worked out a view of the world as they live it, as they

speak about it” (ibid). The third film, *Karam in Jaipur* (2001), follows Karam’s life as a sequel to *With Morning Hearts* (2001). As he affectionately writes, he did it for Karam (ibid: 132). When describing it, he refers to how this film can be seen as a “footnote” of the previous one and how it gives a more concrete picture of the emotional life of a boy facing the challenges of being at Doon School. *The New Boys* (2002) is the next film, made with footage from a second long-term residency at the school, that focuses on a new group of young boys beginning their studies at the school. The filmmaker decided to live in the same house as the students and was closer to them, interacting with them more freely. He gradually became more involved in the children’s daily lives. This film focuses on conversations between the students and himself, as a way to give insight “into the patterns of thought of the kids and their concerns” (ibid: 133). At this point he discovered the triggering effect the camera had on the children: “although I said little, the conversation revolved quite naturally around me and the camera, as if my presence acted as a focus or stimulus for it” (ibid). In this film, and throughout the project, he was observing and having conversations with children about various topics, and he became very interested in the children’s analysis of the adult world. The last film was *The Age of Reason* (2004), edited with the same footage as *The New Boys*. It focuses on MacDougall’s relationship with Abhishek, one of the new boys who had just arrived at the school. Abhishek reacted strongly to the filmmaker’s presence, following MacDougall while talking to him as he filmed. He used to play a game with the filmmaker, “looking into the camera lens and directing it toward different objects, all the time giving a spoken inventory of what he imagined the camera was seeing” (ibid: 134). MacDougall and Abhishek constructed a friendship, spending time together and having various conversations that were recorded by the filmmaker.



Figure 12: Still from film "*Karam in Jaipur*" (2001) by David MacDougall

The film *The Age of Reason* (2004) ended up being a portrait of Abhishek, using scenes from his daily life and conversations with the filmmaker. Since it was filmed at the same time as *The New Boys*, some scenes are repeated in both films. While in *The New Boys* we see Abhishek as part of a group, in *The Age of Reason* Abhishek is the protagonist and his relationship with the filmmaker is displayed more clearly.

*The Age of Reason* is the most personal film in the film series, as well as the most collaborative. In it we hear the filmmaker's voice in the soundtrack in three ways: actively participating in conversations with the boy; as a spoken commentary, reflecting on his relationship with the boy and his progress; and finally, as a guiding voice that connects the events (ibid: 136).

One can say that the considerate and relational experience made possible by filmmaking led MacDougall to understand the bias of childhood representation. He proposed that a better representation could be achieved if children were given more attention, which should start from a different perspective, since "the line between childhood and adulthood was too artificial and was taken too much for granted, based

on a possibly faulty developmental premise, and a whole string of stereotypes” (ibid: 137).

In an attempt to countervail the idea of development, these 5 films developed a representation type, which avoids the linear chronological approach. According to the filmmaker, they function as a cluster and a “three-dimensional structure”. Each provides a different perspective on the school, and also a different perspective on each of the other films (ibid: 122).



Figure 13: Still from film "*The Age of Reason*" (2004) by David MacDougall

MacDougall reflected about the personal impact the project had on himself and his identity:

“Filmmakers sometimes feel themselves emptied, for in reaching out to assimilate the experience of others there is a certain erosion of their sense of themselves. In sharing the worlds of others so intimately, it is possible to lose sight of your own boundaries. It is not uncommon to discover yourself inhabited by your subjects. Long after making a film, you sometimes feel in yourself a gesture, or hear in your mind an intonation of voice that is not your own” (ibid: 137).

His reflections about the filmmaking process are extremely interesting, as he addresses the challenge of identifying with the participants in his films, which results from the intensity of the filmmaking experience. According to the filmmaker, he experienced in himself the world of others, which suddenly became the filmmaker's world. That experience though was unique, since it was one of familiarity as well as difference. He labelled it 'corporeal knowledge' (ibid: 137) and noted how that knowledge enriched his conceptions of childhood.

One of MacDougall's colleagues told the filmmaker that his ethnographical films made in Africa had very much to do with the Doon School films, as both "paid attention to speech and the careful representation of ethnographic film subjects as 'intellectuals' (ibid: 142). This led MacDougall to acknowledge that he had identified the children he worked with as a similarly marginalised group, commonly viewed as primitive subjects: "the last group still stigmatised as incomplete human beings, in need of civilising" (ibid: 142). This project, lead him to reconsider how his previous understanding of childhood had been shaped by "European and American models of progress and improvement" (ibid: 141).

I claim that his strong wish to represent the children he was working with in a more dignified way, originated innovative representations of childhood due to the attention given to each child's subjectivity and their thought processes. He was able to achieve this by listening to them speak to him and to each other, and by giving us details of their daily lives in a series of films that avoid the linear structure of following a group of characters chronologically. His ethnographical films have thus contributed to contemporary discourse regarding the new meanings of childhood.

## Conclusion

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With this chapter, I aimed to take a closer look at the projects reviewed in the first chapter, by analyzing them not only as visual representations of childhood but as ‘cultural texts’ that can be interpreted as experimental ethnographies of childhood. I described *PPD*, the time-based installation of Mary Kelly. In order to create *PPD* Kelly appropriated to the art context the methodologies of ethnography. *PPD* can be read as an experimental ethnography, one that represents childhood through the inter-subjective relationship of motherhood.

Catherine Russell (1999) defines experimental ethnography in film as combining “cultural critique with experiments in textual form” (1999: xii). By reading the four projects presented in this review as experimental ethnographies, I have demonstrated how these are structured around two main axes: first, via the artist’s subjective viewpoint, in a process that may be considered autoethnographical; and second, through the framing of their ‘narratives’ according to a linear approach to time which unfolds events happening in domestic and pastoral environments. I propose that the projects strongly evoke a classical ethnographical paradigm called the pastoral paradigm. That paradigm, first described by James Clifford in his famous essay *On Ethnographical Allegory* (1986), was prevalent in old models of ethnography. As such, I suggest that in the projects reviewed in this context, the image of the child’s body progressively growing up can be seen as an allegory of XIXth century evolutionist narratives in which the child symbolizes the primitive subject.

In the second part of the chapter, I have examined the way the artists acted in their fieldwork practice, i.e. in their daily lives shared with their children. Since the artists observed, described and filmed their children in a very detached manner, one may say that their fieldwork practice was very similar to the classic Malinowskian *mise en scène* of early ethnography. But as this practice was done in the realm of art and not

ethnography, artists-parents made their children relate to their creative practice on a regular basis, which slightly altered their daily lives. I have interpreted the artists' performance as "ethnographers" through the lens of art theorist Hal Foster's famous essay, *The Artist as Ethnographer*, in which he asserted that one of the dangers of the artist acting as an ethnographer was the relocation of the site of the project's political aspects to an 'elsewhere' (1996: 173). While Foster based his analysis on other types of quasi-anthropological art projects, here I use it for the politics of the private sphere, assuming that the 'personal is political'. In the projects reviewed in this context, artists apparently never considered that they were working with an 'other'. Why did this happen? I suggest that it was because of the identification processes occurring between parents and children that easily blur the boundaries between 'self' and 'other'. Their observational fieldwork practice marked their general representations of childhood in such a way that their projects can be read as 'documents of colonialism'. The artists thus excluded from their descriptions more contemporary possibilities of the meanings of childhood. These new meanings call for the child to be viewed as a 'social actor'. Bearing this in mind, I have reviewed the film work and writings of the visual anthropologist David MacDougall, who has worked with children in various projects; his filmmaking practice has made him reconsider his initial assumptions about the meanings of childhood.

Inspired by some of MacDougall's practices, I propose that a new approach to fieldwork is desirable, one that looks at 'fieldwork' as an unstable and experimental area of study and aims to include, more regularly, the child's voice in the creative art practice. In the third chapter I shall explain my own methodology, which I have been developing in my daily practice of working with my child and friends (adults and children), through relational video-making.

## Chapter 3 Methodology: Exploring the Voices and Times of Childhood Through Relational Video-Making

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### Introduction

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In the last two chapters I reviewed several art projects by artist parents who had worked with their children over a number of years. Those artists acted as if they were “ethnographers” investigating their own children. The parents did this by observing the children and recording their lives with their cameras. The children were made to silently act or pose for the camera, notes were taken about their lives and their developmental processes, and memorabilia from the children’s childhood was collected. The resulting footage enabled the artist parents to produce time-based projects depicting their children’s growth. Reading those projects as both cultural texts, and as experimental ethnographies, one can say that the projects provide us with visual representations of childhood done through the developmental paradigm and a linear approach to time, and from the exclusive viewpoint/voice of the artist parents.

In this chapter I present my methodology of working. My video-essay *(un)childhood* based on relational video-making, has focused on achieving a clear goal: to investigate ways of presenting childhood based on a process whereby both the child’s voice and my own (as artist parent) are acknowledged.

Inspired by both the concept of ‘relational aesthetics’, first described by Nicolas Bourriaud in 1998, as well as relational ethnography, I have positioned the set of practices used in my project under the umbrella term of ‘relational video-making’.

Bourriaud describes ‘relational aesthetics’ as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud 1998: 113). He also mentions the idea that art is a “state of encounter” (ibid: 18) resulting from constant negotiations.



Another influence on my project has been relational ethnography. Reading my project as an experimental ethnography, I can state that my son and extended family is my ethnographic field, and that I have appropriated the collaborative methodologies of relational ethnography to my artistic field.

Relational video-making is then characterised by three types of practices. The first of these three practices concerns the active enhancement of the children's own voice through the use of 'play' as a way to engage with children. The inspiration for this has been filmmaking methodologies deriving from the field of visual anthropology, particularly those developed by the ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch. These methodologies include elements such as feedback and improvisation as well as the filmmaker's presence operating as a catalyst for filmic scenes. The second technique I have used in my project has been to record video-conversations. I decided to incorporate excerpts from these conversations into the video-essay so as to include the voice of children and also to enable me to insert a self-reflexive layer into the video-essay, thus better conveying the various temporalities and voices that build up the cultural concept of childhood. Finally, I have used an editing strategy, which affords a clear visualization of the relation between plural subjectivities and different times. I decided to divide the screen into two halves and draw on two archives of material I have gathered. In one of the screens I have placed excerpts of clips from the old archive (old films and photographs from my childhood and several short excerpts taken from three fiction films I saw in the past, when I was a child) while in the other screen I have edited other clips taken from the contemporary video archive that I recorded in collaboration not only with my son, but also with nephews and friends.

As a result of the methods described above I have been able to produce a video-essay about childhood that moves beyond the tendency to represent childhood mainly through adults' eyes/voices and a linear temporality that evokes the

developmental paradigm. My video-essay presents the relational voices of childhood as resulting from the interactions of both adults and children. The video-essay abandons as well the linear temporality adopting instead a non-chronological structure that suggests the relational times of childhood.

## 1. Relational Video-making

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In 2007, when my son Mateus turned four years old, we moved to Sweden. My strong desire to move to the North was inspired by a childhood vision of utopia that held Sweden to be a sort of 'promised land'. During our first weeks in Sweden we explored the city and its surroundings. I was trying to help Mateus to adapt to this new environment so we went to all the open playhouses, parks and funfairs, while at night we watched Swedish children's TV shows, trying to come to grips with the language. Occasionally, I would pick up an old mini-DV camera and film Mateus and myself on our wanderings through the city, or whilst playing in the garden of our Scandinavian flat. I also began to film some domestic scenes from our daily routines. The camera became a way to document our new experience; a tool for relating to Mateus; and a way to visually document and reflect upon our new city and new life experiences. The camera also helped me to deepen my communication with my son and make my own personal experiences clearer. In addition, I encouraged Mateus to film whenever he wanted to. But my son, who was only four at the time, was never very interested in doing so.

After moving to Sweden I began studying for a Masters in Fine Art at the Malmö Art Academy. My life, at that time, revolved around three themes: art, childhood and the discovery of a new city and a new culture. I now realise that art, during that period, provided me with a tool I could use in order to interpret and cope with what was

happening to us. I was relating to life through art. As my artistic relationship with Mateus progressed, I noticed that my view of childhood slowly changed. I vaguely started to conceive the idea of producing some kind of art project about childhood that would include more viewpoints from children.

Two years later this became possible when I began an arts-based PhD. I had a clear goal: to develop a way to artistically portray childhood by means of a video-essay using collaborative methodologies. At the beginning of the project, I initially focused on enhancing the child's voice, however this view changed when I realised that, since I was the mother of that child, I felt it was important that the parent/child relationship be acknowledged within the film. I became interested in enhancing both the child's voice and the child's viewpoints, yet include my own voice and my own viewpoints. Our practice then expanded outside the immediate family sphere (my son and I) to include conversations with other adults about childhood memory and conceptions of parenthood and childhood. I was increasingly interested in the relational process out of which conceptions of childhood are formulated. Thus I organized a series of encounters around the video camera that included both play and conversations. The greater number of these video encounters occurred between my son and myself but some were with other children (my nephews) and some adult friends. All the conversations and encounters were recorded with videocameras operated by all the participants. I have labelled the set of practices I used in my project under the umbrella term 'relational video-making', borrowing the term from Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics*.

#### *The video-encounter as an artistic relational practice*

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In 1998, French art critic and curator, Nicolas Bourriaud, wrote his seminal work entitled *Relational Aesthetics*. In it he proposed a model of art theory that could be

applied to a new type of art – an art that was “process-related or behavioural” and which had emerged during the 1990s. He cited as examples an artwork by Rirkrit Tiravanija that consisted of a dinner held at a collector’s home, furnished with all the ingredients to make a Thai soup, as well as a project by Phillippe Parreno’s of May 1995 – on May 1<sup>st</sup> he invited several friends and artists to a studio to participate in creating T-shirts and teddy bears, reminiscent of a factory assembly line. Bourriaud used these two examples, and others, to describe relational aesthetics as being “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (ibid: 113).

To Bourriaud, art is a “state of encounter” (ibid: 18) resulting from constant negotiations. As he writes: “the form of an artwork issues from a negotiation with the intelligible, which is bequeathed to us. Through it, the artist embarks upon a dialogue. The artistic practice thus resides in the invention of relations between consciousness. Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, give rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum” (ibid: 22).

Bourriaud also referred to the transitivity of the artwork, which he considered the “tangible property of the artwork.” In his opinion, the idea of transitivity, introduces into the aesthetic arena the unavoidable “inherent dialogue” (ibid: 26) that dismantled the “place of art” by favouring the “forever unfinished discoursiveness” of the artwork. He states many times throughout his essay how: “any artwork might thus be defined as a relational object, like the geometric place of negotiation with countless correspondents and recipients” (ibid).

In 2009 the video artist, writer, and educator, Julie Perini, borrowed some of Nicolas Bourriaud’s ideas to write a manifesto, published in *INCITE! The Journal of*

*Experimental Media and Radical Aesthetics* (2009), urging a type of filmmaking that would be more relational. Perini outlined, in her manifesto, various guidelines to be followed when undertaking a relational film project of which the first was as follows: “Relational filmmakers do not make films about people. Relational filmmakers make films with people” (ibid) and “Relational filmmakers do not interview their subjects. Relational filmmakers have conversations with other people” (ibid). Her manifesto summarised her own practice of making films and videos inspired by Bourriaud’s ideas, as she further explained in an essay published in 2011 in the academic journal *AfterImage*. Perini mentions in her essay how she had borrowed the term “relational” from Bourriaud’s ideas on relational aesthetics, adapting it to the context of filmmaking: “Artwork with a focus on relationality was exciting and inspiring to me because of its commitment to uncertainty and fluidity, and ultimately, because of its potential for actual social change and transformation” (2011: 8).

#### *Investigating a plural subjectivity through relational ethnography*

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By reading my project as a “cultural text” (Nichols 1995: 83) I can define it as an experimental ethnography of childhood that has as its ethnographic fieldwork, my immediate family and domestic environment. My project is thus similar to those of the artists reviewed in Chapters One and Two, who have worked with their children to represent childhood. Their projects resulted from one main point of view, their own, but my project takes a different stance as it aims to depict childhood through the point of view of the relationship established between children and adults. My fieldwork practice thus aims to be collaborative and participatory. I am therefore appropriating to the artistic context relational ethnography as a methodological tool.

In an essay titled *Relational Ethnography: Writing and Reading in Research Relationships* (2013), the author, Gail Simon, presents relational ethnography as a

form of inquiry, which emphasises the reflexive dialogical aspects of research relationships. She defines relational ethnography as follows: “I use the term relational ethnography for speaking reflexively and dialogically about, and from within, relationships – whether, for example, from within the different voices of the researcher's inner dialogue, between the researcher(s) and other texts, between the researcher and others in outer dialogue, between writers and readers of research writing. Relationality exists in every part of the research process (McNamee & Hosking, 2011)” (Simon 2013: 1).

Gail Simon categorises relational ethnography as: “It is one of ‘a new array of collaborative, polyvocal, and self-reflexive methodologies’ (Gergen & Gergen, 2002:13) which constitutes a form of inquiry in its own right and can act as an influencing context alongside other research methods” (2013: 01). She also mentions the various kinds of strategies used in relational ethnography: “Relational ethnography includes degrees of collaboration, co-creation and discussion with others in producing research into relational activities” (ibid).

Inspired by relational ethnography methodologies and Nicholas Bourriaud’s ‘relational aesthetics’, I decided to base my project on exploring, as an artistic space, my relationship with my son, and other children. Video was to operate in that space as a relational tool. I used handy-cams and mobile phones, as these are technological devices that are easy to manipulate by anyone, regardless of age and skill. After a few months, my practice of having video-encounters with my son extended itself to having video-encounters with other people, both adults and children. For more than four years I had video-encounters with children in which I played and had conversations, or had video-encounter conversations with adult friends in which we shared personal stories about childhood and parenthood.

In my project, due to the set of collaborative practices I implemented during the fieldwork practice, I was able to strengthen the child's viewpoint and voice as far as possible. Since the focus of the project was on the relational process happening between children and adults, I decided to work with my particular context – that of being a parent - and to include self reflexively in the project, my own childhood memories. In order to do so, I decided to reflect about my past recollections of childhood in recorded conversations with friends, where my friends shared their own memories as well. We also had conversations about our own experiences of parenthood. Finally, when editing the video-essay, I worked out an editing strategy, that would symbolize the relational character of the project. I divided the screen into two halves, so I could edit old super 8 films and photographs of my own childhood side by side with clips originating from the contemporary archive.

In sum, I used three strategies in my project:

1. Relational video-making through shared filmmaking and 'play';
2. Relational video-making through conversations;
3. Relating time: editing past and present images of childhood into a split screen.

The use of these three strategies has enabled me to construct childhood, in the video essay, as deriving from a relational process that is poly-vocal.

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#### [Relational video-making through shared filmmaking and 'play'](#)

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#### *Jean Rouch: A playful cinema*

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One of the key aspects of the relational video-making methodology I have developed has been the use of play, particularly as a way to work with children and enhance children's active voice in the project. My use of play applied to the filmmaking context was inspired by Jean Rouch, a Frenchman who pioneered one of the most

interesting and original approaches to ethnographic filmmaking, one that relies on the development of a collaborative relationship with his informants.

Rouch was born in 1917 and his childhood was quite unique and very happy, as he travelled a great deal, accompanying his father, who was an oceanographer, on his trips. Bernard Surugue, who wrote Rouch's biography, states that:

“Jean Rouch was fond of recalling his childhood which, according to him, was among the happiest of his century. He liked to say that his story as an ethnologist and filmmaker started in early childhood when the gaze of one child met that of another: the young Rouch fancied himself as Nanook, another little boy that lived somewhere else. (...) Along with dreams and projections, a vocation was no doubt born that day. These were Rouch's first steps in his attraction to the other, another mysteriously brought forth from afar, thanks to a wonderful tool, that box of images – the cinema” (Surugue B. 2007: 9-10).

Rouch began by studying anthropology. While still a student, he bought a camera and started filming during a trip to Africa made with a group of friends. Subsequently, when making one of his first films, concerning the hunt of a hippopotamus, *Bataille sur le grande fleuve* (1953), he had a crucial experience that conditioned all his later work. He narrates this episode in his 1971 essay, *The Camera and the Man*. Having decided to show his film to the African Sorko hunters, Rouch illustrated the moving images with a soundtrack containing classical music. His decision was highly criticised by the hunters as they thought the film should have no sound; this led him to cease using classical music in his films. Rouch learned several things from this experience, as he mentions in the book *Cine-ethnographies* (2003), a compilation of his most important essays: “the Sorkos' notion of drama, the specificities of a hippopotamus hunting and his own cultural predisposition to use music as a theatrical device” (ibid: 19).

Rouch's determination to take into consideration the opinion of his informants led him to explore methods that could facilitate his informants' active participation in the



films. The filmmaker invented the term '*anthropologie partagée*' (shared anthropology), which doesn't have a straightforward definition. It acts as an umbrella term encompassing all the techniques he used in his films. In the introductory text to *Cine-ethnographies* (2003), the book's editor, Steven Feld, considers that one of the main characteristics of 'shared anthropology' is a way of looking at fieldwork as 'ethno-dialogue'. What he means is that Jean Rouch was aware of how his presence - as someone filming - influenced and affected the people being filmed. More than just being aware, the filmmaker explored that fact by acting as a catalyst that facilitated the dialogue with his informants. Rouch explains 'shared anthropology' in his 1973 essay *On the Vicissitudes of the Self*. In it he defines shared anthropology as a process:

"It is this permanent ethno dialogue that appears to be one of the most interesting angles in the current progress of ethnography. Knowledge is no longer a stolen secret, devoured in the Western temples of knowledge; it is the result of an endless quest, where ethnographers and those whom they study meet on a path that some of us now call 'shared anthropology'" (Rouch 2003: 100-101).

Feld summarises the methods used by shared anthropology. These are feedback, improvised acting, improvised narrative, psychodrama and the exploration of the presence of the filmmaker and his camera as a catalyst of filmic situations.

Feedback (which Rouch called "*contredon audiovisuel*") meant being able to 'share' the report with those the report was about. Rouch would show his films to his informants, who would afterwards give him their opinions on the research. Feedback allowed the filmmaker to "meditate openly and self critically on his or her own role" (ibid: 19). Rouch used feedback in films such as *Moi, un Noir* (1958), *La pyramide humaine* (1959) and *Chronique d'un été* (1960).

Improvisation was another technique often used by the filmmaker – improvised narration and improvised acting. The first time he used improvised narration was in the

film *Moi un Noir*, about the daily life of a group of Africans in an Ivory Coast slum. During the 1950s, when the film was shot, the technology didn't allow films to have synchronised sound, so *Moi un Noir* film was shot in silence. A few years later, Rouch asked the film's main actor (playing himself), Oumarou Ganda, to improvise a narration over a rough-cut version of the film. Rouch said that in *Moi, un Noir* he was trying to use subjectivity on purpose to deliberately "let Africans portray their own imaginary world and their own fantasies while being filmed in the context of their actual situation" (Rouch in Feld 2003: 6).

Rouch used improvised acting in the film *La pyramide humaine*, whose actors included two groups of high school students from Abidjan. One group was white and the other black, and they didn't know each other. Rouch asked the students to improvise a story about: "what happens if we just meet and decide to become friends and overcome racial prejudices" (ibid: 6). He participated and interfered in what was happening by "filming and interrupting the filming according to how he felt the group was progressing" (ibid), acting as a catalyser. The film was shot in silence, with plans to add sound afterwards; the dialogues were improvised while the actors watched the filmed sequences. Later, in 1961 various sync sound sequences were made and added to the film. According to Steven Feld, the extra sequences, which included a sequence where the filmmaker proposes his idea of doing a collectively improvised story, added an aspect of self-consciousness to the project (ibid: 7).

Finally, what is considered to be the major contribution of Jean Rouch to ethnographic filmmaking practice – of particular inspiration to my own practice – was the use of his own subjectivity in films as a catalyst for filmic situations. This meant that in some of his more experimental films Rouch fully participated in the diegetic space by having provocative conversations with the other participants. As I described previously,

we can find examples of this use of his subjectivity in the film *La pyramide humaine* as well as in the film *Chronique d'un été* (1960), done in collaboration with Edgar Morin.

The film *Chronique d'un été* aimed to inquire into what was going on in the lives of a group of Parisians during the summer of 1960. According to Feld, it combined techniques of “drama, fiction, provocation and reflexive critique”, which Rouch had developed in his previous films (ibid: 7). Parts of the film were screened to its participants; their discussions were recorded and excerpts of the feedback sessions were then included in the final version of the film. The film also showed recorded conversations between Rouch and Morin discussing their aim to study “this strange tribe living in Paris”, as well as their conclusions at the end of the film regarding what they had learned.



Figure 14: Frames from "*Chronique d'un été* (1960), by Jean Rouch

*Chronique d'un été* (1960) is associated with the origins of the term ‘*cinéma vérité*’ (Feld 2003: 7) and was very influenced by Vertov’s film theory. As Joram ten Brink (2007) writes *Chronique d'un été* is both a homage and a continuation of Vertov’s work: “Rouch went one step further by incorporating these feedback sessions in the film itself” (ibid: 242).

Rouch never worked with children directly and never explored more intimate themes such as domesticity or family relationships. Answering a question about this

issue during an interview by Enrico Fulchignoni, the filmmaker mentioned how films about childhood were very hard to make: “I feel that I have never made the films I should have made on that subject. That is, on these familial relationships, on domestic life; these are the most difficult subjects for me. I’d love to film them but I don’t know how” (Rouch 2003: 158).

Rouch’s immense creativity regarding filmmaking led him to develop a singular stance on the act of filming as a playful activity filled with joy and pleasure. He described how he approached life and filmmaking with joy: “(...)With a ciné eye and a ciné ear, I am a ciné Rouch in a state of ciné-trance in the process of ciné-filming. So, that is the joy of filming, the ciné-pleasure. (...) We must have luck; we must have what I call ‘grace’” (Rouch 2003: 150).

‘Play’ was therefore one of the filmmaker’s most important legacies, as Joram ten Brink summarises in the preface of his book on Jean Rouch, *Building Bridges* (2007): “The importance of Jean Rouch’s legacy in the development of visual anthropology, documentary, and fiction cinema, is substantial; early in his career he rejected established forms of documentary and sought new modes of filmmaking to present complex images of ‘reality’ through ‘play’. For Rouch filmmaking was first and foremost about having ‘fun’” (ten Brink 2007: 2).

#### *Playing and filming with children*

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Rouch’s inventive and playful approach to filmmaking has inspired my own practice as I applied some of his techniques to my work, adapting them to the process of filming with children. Inspired by Rouch’s improvisation techniques, I used play and my subjective presence as a catalyst of filmic situations, as a way to engage children in the creative practice, by transforming the filmic experience into a ‘fun’ moment. Finally I

used a simplified version of Rouch's feedback, to review, with my son, the video archive we built up over the course of 4 years.

My interest in using play when filming with children was supported by the idea that play is a key aspect of children's lives. If I was to bring the subjectivity and voice of children to my project, as I aimed to do, I had to find ways to facilitate children's expression of subjectivity. To play with children in an improvised, open way, seemed like an excellent idea.

One of the first academics to study play as a valuable research tool for studying childhood was the psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, who analysed the crucial importance of play in his pioneering book *Playing and Reality* (1968). He wrote: "through playing the subject bridges the inner world with the outer world, within and through transitional space. The capacity to play is synonymous with creative living and constitutes the matrix of self-experience throughout life" (ibid: 597).

In recent times, academics dedicated to childhood studies have explored further the importance of play as a valuable ethnographic research tool. Human geographer Owain Jones, who has extensively studied new ways to research childhood, mentions in his article *True geography [ ] quickly forgotten, giving away to an adult-imagined universe. Approaching the otherness of childhood* (2008), how play can be used to research children's lives, by acknowledging its importance as a "central facet of children's becoming": "Play is a very interesting and nuanced term. It can mean 'give' and 'movement' (as in a loosely articulated joint) as well as the more common notion of playing games. The latter can be seen as a central facet of children's becoming and is certainly, in itself, a highly complex, fluid, messy concept" (ibid: 24).

Acknowledging the importance of play in the lives of children, I then tried to use play as a way to interact with and film in collaboration with my son. I adapted, to our particular context, some of the techniques developed by Jean Rouch.

As my practice progressed, I also developed a set of rules:

- Let children lead the play situations that happen;
- Let them film whenever they want to;
- Avoid just merely observing children with the camera;
- Use cheap cameras such as mobile phone cameras and non-professional handy-cams (easy to wield and able to be used spontaneously);
- Instil my active subjectivity in our filmic encounters by playing with children and participating in our dialogues.

Initially my son Mateus was uninterested in holding and using the camera. However, the camera itself had positive associations for him because it meant 'fun', games and conversations. Quite remarkably, when we played with the camera, Mateus and his cousins would be carried away by the 'fun' and would completely forget about the camera's presence. At other times, though more rarely, the children involved the camera apparatus as part of the set up of our on going play. Due to the engaging nature of our interactions and the affections involved, I too would often forget about the camera as well.

As time went by, I learned how to openly engage with and speak to my child and other children, by acting as a kind of subversive 'catalyst' of filmic situations. Even though I let Mateus and his cousins lead the content of our conversations and the role-plays, I participated fully in these, by taking the roles my son or the other children gave me, which were usually 'the child'. Our moments of play, the main themes of which were "family", "police and thief", or "school", were like 'theatrical versions' of my son's

experiences and interpretations of the world. Those clips turned out to be the most interesting sequences in the project.

#### *Feedback by viewing the video family album*

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Having started to film with my son a few years before the beginning of my PhD, I accumulated a large quantity of clips. It later became a regular family practice to watch the video clips together and our archive functioned as a family album. Showing the videos to my son Mateus, and sometimes to my nephews, was a way to apply, to my family context, the feedback technique developed by Jean Rouch. When viewing the clips we would decide together which ones we should or shouldn't include in the final film.

On the other hand, having to consider the video archive as a family album became somewhat threatening, because the clips reflected our lives very powerfully due to the size of the archive and the intensity of the moving images. By the end of 2012 we had stopped filming and had stopped watching the video archive. A year later, during the summer of 2013, when I was re-editing the final version of the film, we saw our 'video family album' again. We were now able to tenderly reconnect with the images, as they had been stored in our brains as indexes of memories already dealt with.

#### *The child as a filmmaker and a performer*

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During the summer of 2013, while I was editing the final draft of the film *(un)childhood* in the library of our summer house in Lisbon, an extraordinary thing happened: Mateus suddenly became very interested in filming. He had invented an alter-ego character, 'Dr Panda', a musician who had a vlog<sup>1</sup> and music YouTube channel, who would regularly hold fictional Q&A sessions for his fans. He began

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<sup>1</sup> A vlog is a video blog

performing for the camera, asking me repeatedly to film him while he was singing, dancing or talking to his fans about what was happening in his life. I became Mateus's assistant, as he frequently required my help when filming his vlogs. I taught him how to use a video editing software (Final Cut Pro) and Mateus continued to film himself, edit his videos and upload them regularly onto his YouTube channel. By the end of the summer I discovered that Mateus had built up his own video archive of dozens of films of himself as Dr. Panda!

Mateus was taking into his own hands the joy and desire of being able to produce his own representations, using as role models other children who were doing the same thing. With his authorization parts of his vlogs and music videos, were edited in *(un)childhood*, and we chose those clips together.

#### [Relational video-making as shared conversations](#)

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##### [Conversations with my child](#)

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My wish to enhance the child's voice in my film derived from a powerful drive to apply, to the artistic field, my strongest desire as a parent: to have flowing communication with my son. Regardless of how old he was, I was interested in his point of view and his ideas and wished to share them with my own, through fluid dialogue. I began to be interested in filming our conversations and dialogues.

A filmmaker who inspired me to use conversations was the ethnographic filmmaker, David MacDougall, whom I described in Chapter Two. In his *Doon School* films, he tried to experiment with a novel way of depicting children in film by filming them whilst engaged in dialogues with him or between themselves. I have summarised the particularities of his filmmaking in the second chapter. Even though his project come from a particular context that is very different from my own, his way of approaching children - as being able to express their experiences, feelings and visions



of the world - in sum, children as 'thinking and speaking' subjects, is very close to what I had in mind for my own project.

I am aware though that MacDougall's practice is not really experimental, as it results from a classical ethnographical point of view that favours observation. I am also aware of the radical difference between my practice and MacDougall's practice. Whereas I and the other artist-parents I have reviewed previously explore the intimate field of our own family, MacDougall arrives at the school community as a stranger and an academic – a renowned ethnographic filmmaker - to report on it. In his practice MacDougall thus tended to downplay the use of his subjectivity in his dialogues with children, by being as passive and neutral as possible, whereas I moved beyond his approach, by being extremely personal and intimate in conversations with my son (and other children).

During the various years of my fieldwork practice with my son, I thus promoted a space that would facilitate our common dialogues by talking with my son as much as possible about our experiences, feelings, and visions of the world. While speaking, we began filming each other. My son enjoyed our moments of dialogue very much, but was never too keen on filming, often handing me the camera after a while, complaining that holding the camera was tiresome.

### *Conversations with friends*

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To gain better awareness of what I was doing in my project, I began reflecting on my practice during video-recorded conversations with various friends. These conversations ended up being shared conversations about our childhood memories, our general conceptions of childhood and how childhood was linked to our experiences of parenthood. Additionally, the conversations helped me to articulate my ideas and thinking processes throughout the PhD. The clips were not, initially, meant to be part of

the project, as they functioned as a sort of peripheral video diary of my inquiry. However, they gained particular importance when I realised their usefulness in adding a reflexive layer to the video-essay.

The recorded conversations also helped me later on, when editing, to clearly acknowledge in the video-essay my identity as a parent. Of these recorded conversations, the ones I had with my artist friends, António and Mónica, were to become especially important. With António we spoke about childhood memory and with Mónica about childhood memory and experiences of parenthood.

My conversations with António had an unexpected function: I realised when editing excerpts of those conversations into the film, how time was a key concept in childhood. In our previous conversations we had discussed my past utopias about childhood and the utopian projects I projected into my son's life. We had then analysed how my dreams for his life had impacted on his (then) present life. António reflected upon my ideas and clarified them for me, by interpreting them through the point of view of his own personal opinions, experiences and life narratives.

When I edited our dialogues in the film, I realised how these gave the film a reflexive layer that indicated clearly how the various temporal dimensions play with each other in order to build the concept of childhood. A curious aspect of my dialogues with António was that I was also projecting onto António my fantasies about Mateus's future. Like many other parents, I tended to look at childhood by focusing on the child's future, making plans and having expectations about what their lives should be. I was aware that the present choices I was then making, conditioned his future. One particular project I had in mind for Mateus's future was marked by my drive to work out a common language that would enable both of us to speak about emotions and affection in a respectful and profound manner. I very much enjoyed the insightful language António used when he spoke about himself and appreciated his sophisticated

way of talking about his emotions and thoughts. As such, in my recorded conversations with António, I transferred to António my projections about the 'future' of Mateus. With António, I worked on my cultural construct of childhood as 'the future' by simulating with António the 'future' conversations I would have with Mateus. When editing those conversations in the film alongside the other clips, I performed, with the help of my friend António, the concept of 'childhood as the future' in which António embodied my future idealized visualisation of an 'adult' Mateus.

With my friend Mónica, who is an artist mother, our most interesting conversations concerned our experiences of parenthood. I am using the expression parent instead of mother, because the scope of this project is not gender specific. This explains my choice of reviewing projects done by artist parents from both genders, who have worked artistically with their children. In my conversations with Mónica we shared our thoughts on what it was like to be a parent and how we viewed our children. Our dialogues took place in the summer of 2010, at my house in Lisbon, in the same living room where my father had once filmed me. Excerpts of those conversations were included in the video-essay. The excerpts helped me to reflexively perform my identity as a parent in the video-essay and demonstrate how that identity conditions and constructs childhood.

My conversations with friends about childhood, childhood memory and parenthood became key for performing the relational times and voices of childhood in the video-essay.

#### [Relating time: editing past and present images of childhood](#)

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My childhood memories are part of my subjectivity. Having a child, and working artistically with my own child, made me remember intensely many things about my own childhood. I became aware that my childhood memories had to be dealt with in this

project, but in a relational manner that would show how they were dynamic processes, continually reconstructed in the present time, and projected onto other bodies (my son and other children taken as “me” as a child), or evoked in shared conversations.

Besides approaching childhood memories through conversations with friends, as I have described previously, I also decided to use an archive of old films and photographs from my own childhood, and, finally, some short excerpts from three fiction films I had seen when I was a child.

During the seventies, my uncle bought a Kodak super 8mm camera abroad and, during my childhood, used it to record our family. Sometimes he lent the camera to my father who then filmed us as well. These films were mostly about family celebrations: Christmas, birthday parties, social gatherings and some domestic scenes such as my baby cousin taking a bath or the family children (myself, my sisters and cousins) playing happily with each other in the large living room of our house in Lisbon.

A third source from my past comprises small excerpts from three fiction films I had seen as a child. The idea of using excerpts from those films resulted from what I had learned about the symbolic meanings conveyed by visual representations of childhood. We are always in a permanent process of relation to other bodies and images that mirror our own experiences. The visual representations of childhood I had seen as a child had helped me in the past to mirror and interpret my own particular set of experiences. Reflecting, with new eyes, about films that had significantly marked my childhood, I came up with a group of three films: *Fanny and Alexander* (1982) by Ingmar Bergman; *L'Enfant sauvage* (1970) by François Truffaut; and *Manhã Submersa (Morning Undersea)* (1980), a Portuguese film by Lauro António. What these three films have in common is that their main characters are children of strong personality who were subject to old fashioned and authoritarian models of education. In my past,

those three films mirrored my identity as a child, and were somehow indicative of what I was going through.

The film that stands out the most in the video-essay is *Fanny and Alexander*, directed by Ingmar Bergman, which I first saw when I was 12. Oddly enough, I moved to Sweden in 2007 and started my PhD whilst still living there.

### *The split screen as a time travel machine*

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I decided to include the following in the video-essay: the super 8 films; short excerpts from the three fiction films described previously; old photographs of my childhood; and clips from the video archive produced during my current collaboration with my son and friends. My goal was to be able to construct the video-essay by multi-layering all these various types of images and sounds. Trying to devise an editing strategy that would help me relate all those different images, I divided the screen into two halves so that two screens were placed side by side. In one of the split screens the old films were edited at various points on the timeline, while the other screen showed recent clips from the video archive - images of my son, nephews and friends, or old super 8 films as well as photographs from my own childhood. Interestingly, some of the contemporary scenes made with my son, nephews and friends were recorded in the same house where, three decades previously, my father had recorded most of the old films.

When editing, I realised that the split screen device worked well as a kind of deferring mirror, which showed both the singularity of our childhood experiences and the universality of such experiences. The continuous presence of the split screen throughout the whole film constantly incites the viewer to establish relationships between the various images, and to relate those images to their own experiences. The split screens thus function as a metaphor of the film's relational character and serves

as its key strategy to present the relational voices and times of childhood as being the result of the relationships established between plural subjectivities, such as the ones of children, adults, fictional characters, and audience.

## Conclusion

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As I indicated in chapters one and two, artists-parents have tended, in time-based art practice, to represent childhood, through their own singular standpoints and voices. Those representations of childhood have tended to present children in silence, while growing up.

In my project I have looked for alternative ways to represent childhood in a video-essay, seeking a process that would enable me to move beyond the personal viewpoint of the artist parent and the linear temporality evoked by the growing up process. I therefore worked with my son, aiming to focus on the relational process that occurs when a creative relationship is established between two people. I looked for ways to enhance the child's active voice in the project in relationship to my own voice. I also aimed to break the linear approach to temporality, looking for ways to work with time that could evidence how time relationally constructs childhood in an embodied way: our past private experiences and cultural constructions of childhood condition our behaviour in the present, which is, at the same time, shaped by our plans for the future and our current daily experiences.

As such, for several years I considered my family to be my fieldwork and used collaborative techniques to relate artistically to my son, two friends, and the other children (mostly my nephews) that occasionally played with us. I labelled my method 'relational video-making', an umbrella term which includes three types of practices. These are shared filmmaking and 'play'; conversations; and the use of a split screen.

The result of my fieldwork practice has enabled me to produce the video-essay *(un)childhood*, which presents another type of childhood representation, one that moves beyond the tendency to represent children mainly through adults' eyes and the developmental paradigm (conveyed by linear temporality). In my video-essay childhood is performed as being the result of the relational voices of both adults and children. These embody, with their utterances and behaviours, cultural constructions about childhood that have been shaped by the human interactions happening over time, ones which are constantly placed in relation to each other and re-enacted in the present moment.

## Chapter 4 Performing the Relational Voices of Childhood in the Video-essay

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### Introduction

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In the last chapter I described the methodology I developed, which aimed to discover novel ways of approaching the concept of childhood in a time-based art project. My goal was to depict childhood in a video-essay that combined both the child's subjectivity and point of view with my own subjectivity, my subjectivity symbolising that of the adult. I aimed to find a relational method that was both open and collaborative. My project thus aimed to investigate how the relational voices of both children and adults construct the cultural concept of childhood. I also intended to find new ways of approaching "time" that would break with the chronological approach as I had observed how that kind of temporal construction evoked one of the more classical approaches to childhood representation: the developmental paradigm.

With this in mind, I conceived a set of practices, which I placed under the umbrella term 'relational video-making' and edited the video-essay *(un)childhood*.

Over the course of the PhD I have become aware that my project is about the relational voices and times of childhood. In this chapter I will analyse how the video-essay *(un)childhood* performs the relational voices of childhood whereas the following chapter will approach relational time.

My understanding of "voice" is two fold: on the one hand it points to the literal usage of children and adults' voices as a tool that enables them to communicate with each other and articulate their unique experiences. On the other hand, "voice" holds a symbolic meaning, the one of "giving voice", which connects voice to agency and power.

Due to its intimate personal nature, *(un)childhood* can be categorised as a first-person film, expressing a first person plural subjectivity. The film is presented on two half-screens, i.e. the screen is split into two halves. The split screen is a trope of the



film's relational approach to childhood. In *(un)childhood*, 'I' versus 'you', the adult's voice versus the child's, swiftly shifts to the voice of 'we', the one arising from the joined action of our plural voices, arising from the context of the relationships we establish between ourselves.

Regarding the child's voice, the film presents the literal voice of the child in conversations and play. The factual use of the child's voice has a political aspect, as it can be interpreted through the lens of feminist and post-colonial studies that have historically connected voice to speech and agency. Through voice, the child gains a unique identity as an active, creative and thinking being, which differs from the way children were portrayed in the projects reviewed in Chapter 1 and 2.

The child's voice is also expressed in play moments. Play is one of the most important themes of the film, and serves to subvert fixed identities: at times the film disengages the voice of the child from the child's body, by showing the adult playing and 'performing' the child, as well as the other way around (the child 'playing' the adult). But the main stance is that the child's voice is always performed in the film as embedded and in relationship (thus responding) to the voice of others.

With regards to the adult's voice, this is present in the video-essay in many shared conversations and play moments, with both children and adults, and in my personal reflections expressed through my silent voice, that comes through in the subtitles. My voice expresses my subjectivity, my memories and my identity as a parent. Similarly to the previously reviewed projects, my project results from the specific context of parenthood. But *(un)childhood* puts forward a different approach to the identity of the artist as a parent, by addressing that identity openly and self-reflexively inside the diegetic space of the film. Even though I openly approach my identity as a parent, I don't see the video-essay as being about parenthood. Parenthood, in itself (traditionally seen through the point of view of its responsibilities

and traditions, such as the parent being the care taker, the nurturer, the disciplinarian) is not analysed, as Mary Kelly does in her project PPD. Instead, parenthood is looked at as being a key relational process of embodied action that contributes to the construction of childhood as a cultural concept. Parenthood is therefore one of the relational voices of childhood.

I am aware that the video-essay puts forward a performance of parenthood that tends to favour the positive values of willingness to foster communication, and closeness with the child. Even though it is that very focus on open communication that enables the active voice of the child, such a biased standpoint risks being partial as it fails to openly acknowledge the unavoidable power issues that exist in a parent-child relationship. Nevertheless it is that focus that enables the project to perform the cultural concept of childhood in a completely different way from previous projects, even if the picture put forward can be looked at with suspicion, as a fantasist one.

The voice of the adult emerges in the video-essay through the adult's childhood memories, but these are approached in a relational manner: my own childhood memories are discussed and shared with those of other adult friends, in several conversations, that are fragmented and scattered throughout the whole film. Childhood memory is also approached through visual imagery, by relating excerpts of clips from an old super-8 mm family archive originating from my own childhood as well as a number of fictional films viewed when I was a child, to contemporary clips recorded during our fieldwork practice. The silent voice (the subtitles) then comments on the assemblage of these various clips.

As a result of all these strategies, the video-essay expands beyond our immediate family context by relating our stories and experiences to those my friends António and Mónica and those conveyed by the characters present in the fictional films and my family member in the archival footage.

The multi-layering of all these relational interactions occurring between various voices constructs a relational voice in the video-essay as the one responsible for performing 'childhood'. I conclude the chapter by explaining how the film's title alludes to the '(un)knowability' of childhood, understood here as a fluid creative concept, which like any other cultural construction is in a continual process of reconstruction as time passes.

## 1. Performing the relational voices of childhood in *(un)childhood*

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### From representing to performing childhood

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Theories of performativity, pioneered by Judith Butler's work on gender performance (1993/1997), have been widely used in visual and film studies. These theories, considered to be a recent development in the field of film and media studies, are used by various scholars attempting to reconsider the film image as "moving materiality/corporeality" (del Rio 2014:2) and as a possible way to move beyond the representational model, seen as "unwilling or insufficient to address the way in which the experience of the moving image can at times escape binary determinations and established signifying codes" (del Rio 2014: 2).

Cecilia Sayad is another author who has recently looked at filmmaking through the lens of performance. Her book, *Performance, Corporeality and the Borders of Film* (2013), explores notions of the expression of identity in filmmaking. Sayad states that "performance provides us with a model with which to articulate the benefits of thinking in terms not only of a subject's expression, but also of presence" (ibid: 2) and "performance describes a conception of identity as fluid, unfinished, in the making (ibid)".

Many of Sayad's considerations on performance are drawn from the work of Judith Butler. Butler's work addressed the performance of gender, wherein she describes gender as a 'doing', a practice produced performatively (Butler: 1990) through a process of iterability –“regularised and constrained repetition of norms” (Butler 1993: 95).

The relational voices of *(un)childhood* can be read through the aforementioned theories. One can say that through 'voice' and the physical presence of both the child and the adult in the diegetic space, while playing and talking to each other, we both perform how our actions construct childhood through a relational process. It is through what one says and does as a parent or as a child, that one performs, in action, cultural constructions of childhood wherein all the players function relationally as mirrors of each other. *(un)childhood* can be said to approach the voices and times of childhood as a “culturally prescribed performance” (Gergen 2009: 75) constructed in co-action.

#### [The split screen as symbol of the relationship](#)

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There is in *(un)childhood*, a clear symbol of its relational nature: the split screen, which divides the screen into two halves separated by a border. As explained in chapter three, the screens are displayed side by side. The participants in the film (myself, my son, my friends, and other children) appear in either one or the other of the screens, whilst engaged in conversations across the border or in play moments. In other sequences, extracts of fictional films are related simultaneously to archive footage from my childhood or to clips from the present.

The split screen hence symbolises the interplay and combination of various subjectivities and points of view. By displaying the split screen, throughout the video-essay's 53 minutes, the spectator is constantly reminded of the relational process out of which childhood is constructed.



Figure 15: Frame of video-essay *(un)childhood*

### *(un)childhood: a video-essay about “us”*

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In the video-essay two main subjectivities stand out in a very detailed manner: my son’s and mine. *(un)childhood* can thus be categorised as a first-person film. In Alisa Lebow’s book *The Cinema of Me – the self and subjectivity in first person documentary* (2012) she states that the label ‘first-person film’ is primarily about a mode of address: “these films ‘speak’ from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position” (ibid: 1). But that mode of address can be either the ‘I’ or the ‘we’, as the first person grammatical structure can be either singular or *plural*. She writes: “An ‘I’ that is relating to ‘another one’ is implicit in that the one doesn’t speak without the other, that in fact, the ‘I’ inheres in the ‘we’ if not vice versa” (ibid: 3).

Lebow relies on the ideas of Jean Luc Nancy (2000) regarding how the singular never exists alone as “being one is never singular but always implies and indeed embodies another” (ibid) to convey the common sense idea that the singular holds in itself a plural constitution as “the I is always in relation, always social” (ibid). By analysing the ‘I’ of first-person filmmaking, Alisa Lebow concludes that the expression

of the 'I' in first-person filmmaking films is not a first person singular 'I', but "always in effect a first person plural 'we'" (ibid). First-person films can thus be seen as "expressing a commonality, a relatedness to a society, to a group, our plurality (ibid)", which leads Lebow to consider them as "cinema of we" rather than a "cinema of me" (ibid).

*(un)childhood* is evidently a video-essay about 'we'. That 'we', which originates from the relationship established between my son and myself surpasses the family sphere: our relationship is related to conversations with friends, other children, and fictional characters. In the film, these 'others' are not abstract allusions but rather are physically and emotionally present, and their embodied performances are conjoined to ours. Overall we function as a plural dynamic voice in permanent relationship. *(un)childhood* can thus be described as a film about 'us'.

## 2. The child's voice

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One of the main goals of this project was to enhance children's points of view; this was achieved through the inclusion of their voice. To do so I had conversations and play moments with my son Mateus, albeit also with other children, especially my nephew Paulinho (as described previously). Those clips were edited into the video-essay, which presents the child as a speaking being, who is capable of thinking and articulating his ideas and who, through his actions and voice, actively participates in the creative process.

By literally using the voice of children, *(un)childhood* approaches childhood in a manner entirely different from that of the other artists, who have tended to work with their children in silence. By not including the voice of their children in their projects, artists have presented them symbolically as abstract symbols of childhood.

My emphasis on the literal usage of children's voices has a specific connotation, as following the work of various feminist and post-colonial scholars, I approach voice by connecting it to speech, agency and power. As Lisa Cartwright writes in her book *Moral Spectatorship, Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child* (2008): "'Coming to voice' is a figure of speech in a range of political movements connoting the achievement of agency, usually belatedly or through a political struggle before which the individual or collective subject who speaks is understood to have been 'silent' or 'invisible'" (ibid: 6).

In my film the child's voice assumes a political aspect. The child is visually portrayed in circumstances similar to those of the adult: both are equally seen and heard in a creative and affectionate relationship involving exchange and dialogue.

I am aware, however, that my role as a researcher, interested in researching childhood, can be placed within a recent discursive tradition that pertains to the adult world: that of studying children as 'active agents in society'. As the geographer Owain Jones writes: "research into children and childhood is a form of what Thomas and Hacking (2003) term 'colonisation'" (ibid: 198).

Kylie Valentine's essay *Accounting for Agency* (2011) reviews how childhood studies have approached agency, indicating how agency is usually an argument for increased participation, even though the emphasis is "on process, not outcomes" (ibid: 354). What she proposes then is an understanding of agency "more politically inflected" and "constituted by a social that should be more aware of its power dimension" (ibid: 353). That account of agency "should be as well sensitive to differences between children, as well as differences between adults and children" (ibid). The author then suggests a model of "difference with equality" (ibid). She states: "Rather than viewing children as incomplete adults, and therefore incapable of contributing, this model

values the differences between children and adults, including the different perspectives they have on what is important” (ibid).

In my video-essay, done from the viewpoint of the relationship, I clearly assume my subjectivity as an adult, artist and parent. While both have agency, our agendas are clearly different. Childhood is performed as the result of a relationship happening in time, embodied in voices expressing different points of view and different experiences. The film acknowledges the asymmetry of power, yet plays, in some sequences, with the representation of a vulnerable adult who doesn't mind playing the 'child'. Our common agency results not from power struggle but from creative collaboration and play.

It is important to acknowledge though, that our direct collaboration was limited to the years of fieldwork practice, as my son was not involved in the editing of the video-essay. Even though I tried to engage him in the editing process, Mateus lacked interest in the film project per se.

The video-essay shows how, overall, I am the one who is in control. If some clips display my vulnerability when collaborating in the fieldwork practice (as will be explained later on), the overall film, in its complex multi-layered structure, demonstrates my tight control of the editing process. On the other hand, I believe that my son's voice responding to my own as the editor, comes through discreetly in snippets of films he did independently, when he edited his own video-archive and produced his own music videos, for his YouTube channel. Parts of these are included in *(un)childhood*, and can be interpreted as his indirect contribution to the editing of the film.



In *(un)childhood* the child's individuality and identity presents itself clearly defined through voice, within the context of conversations and play moments. Our relational process is evident in the dialogue at 16'35" where both of us recall a moment of happiness: the most beautiful day in our individual lives. As I narrate with joy to an attentive Mateus, the details of his birth, he empathises with my feelings and reciprocates by narrating one of the happiest moments of his own life, which was when he met his best friend Elias. Mateus, who stands out as the main symbol of the child in the video-essay, presents the viewer with details of his daily life, openly displaying his character through his likes and dislikes and his dreams.

By focusing on the expression of "thought", through voice, *(un)childhood* differs from the other artistic projects reviewed in chapters one and two which tended to present children in silence, while engaged in physical activities. Those children lack a name, and a more specific identity. Even in the project "Post Partum Document", where we have a better picture of the child 'Kelly', the son of Mary Kelly, the boy is still represented as not actively participating in the creative process, but more like an abstract child, a case study like the ones discussed in books on paediatrics.

In *(un)childhood* Mateus articulates his experiences through speech, in a thoughtful manner, while playing or having conversations. Mateus's dialogues and speech perform, in an embodied manner in the film's diegetic space, his identity as a thinking subject filled with agency. One particular clip, at time code 42'07", shows the child's critical reasoning very clearly, whilst relating it to the adult's actions and decisions. In this sequence I ask Mateus about Sweden, and he answers my questions very clearly, telling me his opinion about Sweden and how he wishes to return to Portugal.

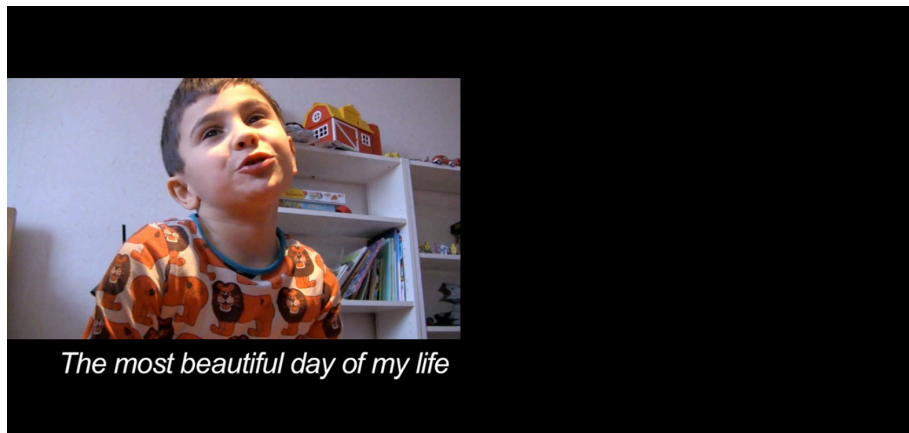


Figure 16: frame from video-essay *(un)childhood*

Our conversation clearly exemplifies how the video-essay displays the child as someone able to express his own opinions and even contradictory views about what is shaping his life experiences, and how these are strongly conditioned by my decisions, since I am his parent. Children and adults' thought processes are thus shown in the video-essay as precisely the same, but contingent to one's experience and vocabulary. The video-essay displays children using language to process and communicate what happens in their lives, and to express creative and analytic ideas about their experiences. Their language, arising from the context of conversations, sometimes mirrors that of the adult: in a dialogue between myself and Paulinho at 14'22" my nephew tells me about his strategies for dealing with *incubi* (dreams), concluding the dialogue by clearly referring to my questioning, stating that "dream fairies ask the best questions!"

The video-essay shows children and adults listening, sharing and interpreting the experiences of each other. Evidently, due to its relational stance, the film also openly displays the asymmetry of vocabulary and variety of experiences that exists between adults and children, which alludes to the asymmetry of power existent between children and adults.

*(un)childhood* shows several clips done solely by Mateus. During the summer of 2013 Mateus began using the iSight device on his laptop to film a series of clips in the living room of our old Lisbon family home. The clips are vlogs of his life inspired by YouTube videos made by child musicians. In these, Mateus films himself as a musician, Dr Panda, who is a young singer. Mateus impersonates Dr Panda and chronicles the events of his life through his vlogs and shares them on YouTube.

Through the inclusion of Mateus videos in the video-essay, yet another relational voice is added to the video essay: the one of his own voice in relation to that of other children who use video and YouTube as a way to play and broadcast their video creations. By means of his vlogs – understood as a technology of subjectivity<sup>2</sup> – Mateus contextualises himself vis-à-vis the most popular representational tropes pertaining to the childhood of his time, and the representational technologies of his generation. Mateus’s vlogs, where he represents himself as an author and performer, can also be seen as mimicking, and creatively responding to, my actions as a filmmaker creating a video archive and then editing it into a video-essay. Previously, Mateus never wanted to be the one filming when playing with me, (because holding the camera was tiresome and seen as “work”) and he lacked any interest in the editing process. However I believe my actions definitely influenced him to make his own video-archive and to engage in his own independent filmmaking experiences.

By including excerpts of his vlogs in the video-essay and one musical video clip made autonomously by Mateus, the voice of the child is included as an author. That

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<sup>2</sup> Technologies of subjectivity, says Foucault “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or mortality” (Foucault 1998:18 in Rascaroli 2014: 230).

voice surpasses the context of the relationship to the parent and family, and contextualized in relation to the other voices present in the video-essay, becomes increasingly complex and inter-textual.

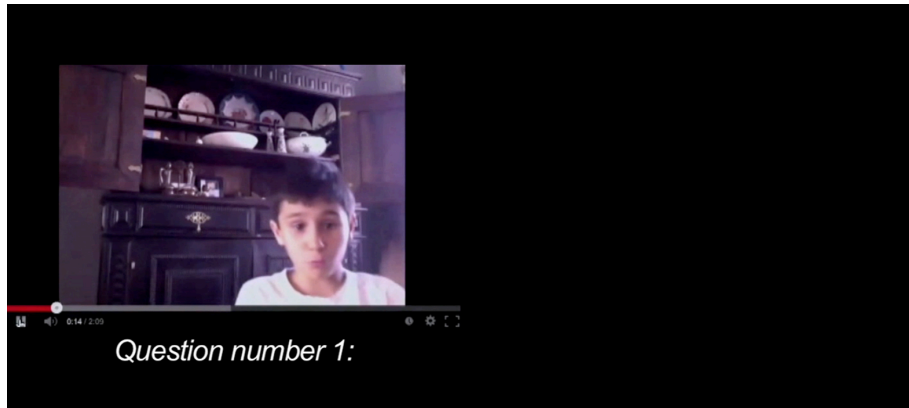


Figure 17: Frame from *(un)childhood*

### [Life as a play: playing 'life' through filmmaking](#)

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Play, one of the most important aspects of my methodology, is introduced in the film early on, at 03'18". In the aforementioned sequence, five year old Mateus is playing in a Malmö playground. He has invented a game and explains its rules: he has to catch dolphins so he can have more 'lives'. Our conversation shifts to a more philosophical one, and Mateus lets me know his version of what life is: "life is a body that can run and move and talk." This clip is anticipated by another one of a Swedish landscape at 02'57" and by a sequence of subtitles that comment on the images: "I have been playing some games, making some experiments; I play with video, while relating to life."

The idea of 'life as a play', derives from a long literary tradition and it suggests the experimental creativity inherent to life. Both sequences evoke the notion of play as a relational and creative activity that happens between children and adults.

In chapters one and two I described how the filmmakers Stan Brakhage, Erik

Bulot and Ernie Gehr observed and filmed their children playing alone or with each other. When playing, children allegorised in their projects one of the strongest metaphors of childhood – playing children as symbols of creative potential, carefreeness, vitality and innocence.

*(un)childhood* takes a different approach to play, precisely by presenting play as a relational activity seen through the viewpoint of child-adult interaction, as one can see at various points in the film. For example, at 08'12" Mateus states that he wants to play with me. In various clips we fluidly role-play various identities such as those of being a teacher, parent, narrator or child. The recurrent themes of our play moments are 'school' and 'family'. Though the adult tends to be the play's catalyst, it is the child who directs the adult. Through play, we subvert the specific roles of who is who. 'Play' allows us to embody each other's identity. Sometimes I am given the role of 'the child', while my son plays 'the adult'. Our process is evident in the following two examples:

In a clip beginning at 33'11" Mateus and myself play two main characters, a child and his 'best friend' Emil, who are involved in a power struggle with a teacher at school. I'm supposed to be the child in the game but my role fluidly changes as Mateus gives me different identities. The child clearly assumes responsibility for the game by saying authoritatively that since he invented it he should be the one who decides what happens. Through that improvised scene, the film performs and subverts the web of adult-child power relationships.

The second example is at 21'17" when I join Mateus and my nephew Paulinho, who are playing 'parents'. The children give me the role of 'Aunt Ari' and I participate off-camera. Even though Mateus loves to play with filmmaking he doesn't like to film when playing. When I ask him to film me, in this sequence, he refuses and hands me the camera.



Figure 18: Still from *(un)childhood*

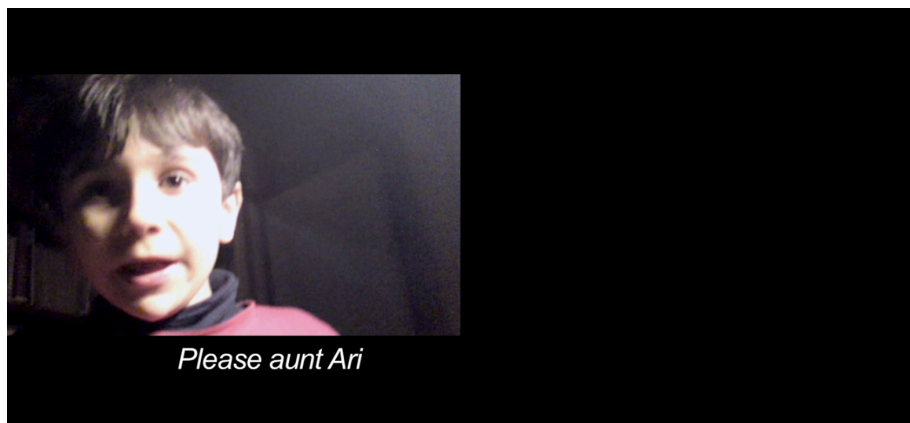


Figure 19: Still from *(un)childhood*

When showing children and adults playing together *(un)childhood* performs the child as someone who uses play very creatively to interpret and relate to what happens in a common world of both children and adults.

#### Growing up backwards and onwards: playing the powerful child

Of all the various themes regarding our play moments in the film, that of power stands out. Power, or the lack thereof, certainly seems to influence the experience of childhood, and the connections between power and childhood have been widely studied. In the book *Childhood Figurations* (2002) by Claudia Castañeda, the author writes about power linking it to subjection, by mentioning Judith Butler's reflections on the inevitable subjection of children when considering the "passionate attachment" of children toward their caretaker (Butler in Castañeda 2002: 156). As she writes:

“Conversely, the child is also figured as the embodiment of originary dependence, a body whose subjectivity is constituted in and through this passionate attachment” (ibid).

In Alice Lebow’s book “The Cinema of Me: the self and subjectivity in first person documentary” (2012) the author addresses the fundamental connection between subjectivity and subjection when writing about the subject in first-person filmmaking:

“(…) before we can imagine ourselves at all, before we can think of ourselves as independent or autonomous, we are already subject to another’s will, to other powers and forces not of our own making, and indeed, subject to another’s gaze as well. Linking notions of subjecthood and subjectivisation, then, inextricably ties the concept of the individual to entire systems of relation, interdependency and power” (Lebow, 2012:4).

Representations of power in childhood have additionally been studied through the lens of aesthetics. Ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall, who studied the aesthetics of power in his school films about childhood, described power aesthetics as one component of social aesthetics, which he calls “culturally patterned sensory experiences” (MacDougall 2006: 98). Curiously, MacDougall alludes to the performativity inherent to power aesthetics when stating that it is “as much an enactment of power as a representation of it” (ibid: 109).

When reviewing the projects of the filmmakers and artists presented in Chapters 1 and 2 one notes a certain kind of power aesthetics. Gehr’s film “*For Daniel*”, which portrays his son until he was four, without any sound and via a fixed camera perspective, strongly evokes the watchful camera as a metaphor for the surveillance that occurs in childhood. Regarding Mary Kelly’s project “*Post Partum Document*”, the artist literally represents childhood’s processes of power by including in her documents extracts from her diary in which she describes disciplinary measures used with her son, and the power struggles of their relationship. Erik Bullof allegorically performs the

watchful eye of the parent as a coloniser when showing, in his films, the growing face of his son seriously looking at the camera. Finally, filmmaker Brakhage fully acknowledges how “*Scenes from Under Childhood*” (1967-1970) resulted from his willingness to film children standing up to reaffirm his status as an adult (Brakhage 1997 in MacDonald 2005: 85).

*(un)childhood*'s allusion to the power dynamics of childhood happens in a different way, particularly in our moments of play. Those clips perform an adult actively willingly to experiment with vulnerability, by playing the role of ‘the child’: I roll on the floor, go into small spaces and under blankets and chairs with the camera, and play ‘make-believe’ by changing my voice tone to imitate that of the child (33’24”). My performance can be risky. As Kellett (2003) states: “adults simply cannot become children again because they cannot discard the adult baggage they have acquired in the interim and will always operate through adult filters, even if these are subconscious filters” (Kellet, 2003 in Jones O. 2008: 7).

Another way to read my performance as a ‘child’ is as a role-play of reversed processes of subjection. When giving away my power, I ‘subject myself’ once again and on purpose to a process of ‘subjection’. The ‘playing the child’ moments end up relationally alluding to my past childhood dream of having more power (common to many children). When playing, my son becomes myself, as a past powerful child.

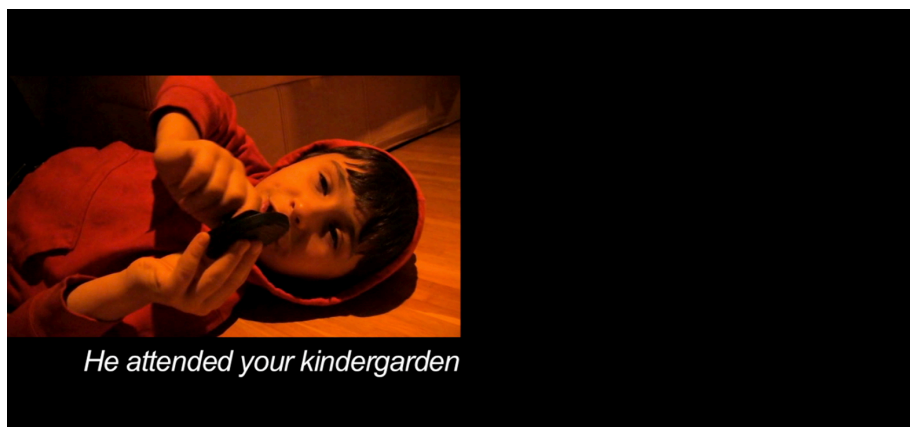


Figure 20: still from *(un)childhood*



My performance as a 'child' can be understood through yet another lens: by 'playing the child' I also perform a 'contemporary parent' who follows current parenting trends that reinforce relationality, playfulness, open communication and involvement in the child's interests (the films children watch, favourite toys, daily occurrences). As a contemporary parent, I have to be always ready to engage in the complex dance of either being able to play and 'be' a child again, and being a responsible adult that nurtures, guides and ultimately has power over the child. In the safe space of my project, particularly the fieldwork practice, when I 'embody' the child I am able to gain some kind of bodily understanding and increased empathy towards the child's points of view and experiences.

The time-based dance regarding power shown in the film indicates how childhood subjection is an inter-subjective experience played out over time and through the establishment of family relationships, which reproduce old behavioural patterns repeated from generation to generation. Power is shown as arising from relational interactions between both adults and children. But when playing together, we disrupt the usual patterns: childhood subjection becomes both visible and subverted.

But the 'playing the child' moments are just a small part of the film, and the overall film clearly shows that an adult is the one leading the project, and the one who mostly films.

Over the course of this project I learned that what was important to me, was not necessarily as important to the ones I was thriving to collaborate with. I had to adapt and find alternatives. If I was interested in collaborating with Mateus through filmmaking, Mateus was just interested in playing and talking with me. As such, the "play" clips mentioned previously might lose visibility in the whole of the film and, as a whole, one could argue that the video-essay displays an adult who is fascinated with

the idea of being a powerful child, a child that, besides knowing how to play, is now playing with the articulation of her ideas with filmmaking. There is an overwhelming layer of abstraction present in the film that corresponds to a way of thinking and enquiry that comes evidently from an adult. Seen through this point of view, the goal of making a film that conjoins both points of view isn't totally achieved in the final edited piece, particularly if we aim for a conjugation of voices happening always *at the same time*.

On the other hand, if we look for the relation of voices happening in asynchronous times, we can interpret the video-essay through yet another point of view. The powerful child can be seen in my son's independent voice coming in *another time*, a delayed one, not through immediate collaboration, but afterwards, and inspired by my own practice. His voice is discreetly present in excerpts of films and the inclusion of a complete music clip he did on his own. These were taken from his music and video-archive YouTube channel.

### 3. The adult's voice

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The adult's voice is expressed openly in the video-essay in two ways: through subtitles that function as a silent text, which self-reflexively narrates my thoughts, and through my image and voice, in play moments and conversations. The adult is shown as having many roles and a specific subjectivity. One important role is that of parenthood – the most fundamental viewpoint through which I approach and relate to childhood. Even though I am a mother, the context of this thesis is gender unspecific, so I will use 'parenthood' in the text. My subjectivity is also present through my personal set of childhood memories, which are approached self-reflexively in conversations, to show how memory influences one's actions and the type of approach

to childhood.

### The voice of the parent

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My identity as a parent is firmly stated when at 07'16" my son says he wants to play alone with me, calling me 'mommy'. The short dialogue we exchange alludes to one of the most important themes of the video-essay, which is that of 'play'. Through the use of 'play', parenthood is evoked as a creative relationship, which reinforces its status as a performance. The type of parenthood displayed in the video-essay is very intimate, which is clearly suggested in clips where we both bathe together or have intimate conversations in bed about our dreams (43'14").

Parenthood is also approached reflexively, by including in the film my silent voice in subtitles, and excerpts of conversations with friends, in which we share stories, memories and ideas about childhood and parenthood. Those conversations are scattered throughout the film.

Working with my identity as a parent openly and in a reflexive manner is similar to what Mary Kelly did in her project *Post Partum Document* (PPD). As described in chapter two, *PPD* can be read as a theorisation of 'the artist as mother' being "performatively worked through" (Carson, Julie: 2010). In *PPD* Kelly works with the depiction of her son's growth process as a way to analyse her own experience of motherhood. *PPD* can also be studied from an alternative point of view: as a document that shows the technologies of subjectivity and the dynamics of power adopted by parents, to control and subjectify children.

*(un)childhood* offers a different position regarding parenthood which is diverse from the one of Mary Kelly's project. *(un)childhood* performs how my actions and views of childhood as a parent, participate in the construction of the cultural concept of childhood. Parenthood is one of the relational voices of childhood.

Parenthood is performed in the video-essay as aiming to emphasize some of the contemporary parenting standards of dialogue, open communication and affectionate intimacy, which were put into practice through our fieldwork practice. Such an emphasis can obviously be seen as partial as parenthood implies other things as well.

A second radical difference is the way my experience of parenthood is contextualised to that of others, in conversations with adult friends. Some of our dialogues, especially those with my friend Monica, offer different outlooks on motherhood. In a dialogue in the living room of our Lisbon childhood home, my position contrasts to that of Monica, who sees her child as a separate person:

*MARIA: The experience of a being that was part of our body, that was inside of us, that was no 'I'. The experience of being 'no I' outside of the glass of water... the acceptance of another, which is not exactly another, it is 'another' that is also 'you'.*

*MÓNICA: Actually I don't see my daughter as myself.*

*MARIA: I 'see'. I 'see' that I am not 'myself' anymore... You know? I 'see' that there is a space." (at time code 24'11", my own translation).*

By editing these dialogues into the film, parenthood is performed as resulting from a fluid flow of subsequent identification processes happening between the parent and the child. While the child is sometimes merged with the identity of the adult, at other times the child is seen as a separate being. Such an approach evokes and performs in the film, through voice, the process-related spirit of relational identifications that enable the cultural construction of childhood.



Figure 21: still from *(un)childhood*

One could consider that this video-essay performs parenthood and not childhood. In my opinion, the video-essay approaches parenthood, as being a relational process that enables the construction of childhood. As such, *(un)childhood* self-reflexively performs how the behaviour of the parent towards the child contributes to the construction of the cultural concept of childhood. It shows how parents or caretakers, put into practice their plans for their children, or re-enact old traditions and cultural patterns concerning childhood through their actions and how those plans change and adapt, when having to face the agency and free will of the child.

Through various conversations, the video-essay displays an awareness of the parent as the programmer of childhood: when openly discussing with my friend Antonio how my past fantasy about Sweden led me to move to Malmö (39'11'') I perform and self-reflexively examine my role as a 'programmer of the experiences of childhood'. Another example is the following: when I, as a parent, decide to edit in the video-essay clips of Mateus fighting the sea (37'22'') or running in beautiful landscapes, and relate those clips through the split screen to excerpts of early films, I openly display and perform two things: On one hand an awareness of the allegorical nature of the very common metaphor of the use of the child as an abstract symbol of the primitive being playing in the Garden of Eden, on the other hand how I, as a parent, contribute with my

actions to the embodied construction of that metaphor.

Due to my option of refraining from commenting on those idyllic clips, these can be seen as reinforcing the classical myths of childhood. But the clips evoking those myths are conjugated in a multi-layered text. More than deconstructing the myths, what the video-essay aims to do is to demonstrate how the various players that construct childhood engage with each other, and how their conjoined actions, which are influenced by various discourses, personal experiences and interests, contribute to the construction of the concept of childhood.

### [My voice: childhood memories](#)

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From the start of this project I aimed to recall and find ways to visualise my own forgotten childhood experiences, by engaging in a creative relationship with my son. I was thus following in the footsteps of earlier artists who tended to use their children as a way to work in their artistic practice, with their own childhood memories. I thought that to work with my childhood memories was very important because, as an adult, I became increasingly aware of how part of my adult childhood constructions were based on the legacy of the experiences I had lived as a child.

In *(un)childhood* my approach to childhood memories turned out to be diverse from the one of the artists reviewed previously. The video-essay presents childhood memories as resulting from a relational process happening in the present. Those memories are approached both through conversations with friends and through an old archive of photos and films from my childhood.

### [Relational memories through conversations with friends](#)

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*(un)childhood* takes a relational approach to childhood memories: memories are voiced out loud and related to those of friends. These shared conversations help us to approach our memories by articulating them in the present moment.

At a particularly interesting moment in the video-essay (11'46'') I ask my friend Patrik about his first memories. This leads to an interesting conversation, where we compare memory to the unfolding of a film. In another conversation (26'28''), I tell my friend Antonio my first memory: a garden, autumn leaves, some steps, a feeling of a presence.

The film symbolically alludes to the impossibility of capturing authentic unique inaugural memories. My friend Monica, for example, answers my query about her earliest memories by questioning the idea that we can contain the first memories of childhood in one image (20'23'').



Figure 22: still from (un)childhood

All of us have some very early images and stories to share. When sharing those memories with each other we discover common patterns, as we all seem to recall light, nature, gardens, a sensation of presence, and deep emotions of love and loss. When the uniqueness of my own childhood memories is compared to the ones of various others, childhood memory gains, in the common patterns of our experiences, a universal character.

#### *Finding relational childhood memories in films*

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At certain points in *(un)childhood*, one views small excerpts from fiction films: these are the most meaningful films from my own childhood, and are edited alongside

with clips from an old family archive of super-8 films and photographs as well as clips taken from the recent contemporary archive. Underneath the images are subtitles, commenting on what is shown.

The reason for the discrete presence in *(un)childhood* of short excerpts from fiction films is their indirect allusion to my childhood memories. The films were all viewed when I was a child and are the ones that marked my childhood. They are “*L’Enfant sauvage*” (1970) by François Truffaut, “*Fanny and Alexander*” (1982) by Ingmar Bergman, and “*Manhã Submersa (Morning Undersea)*”(1968) by Lauro António, a Portuguese filmmaker. These films played a crucial role in my childhood, because, by watching them, I could visualise, in a disembodied way, what I was experiencing. They mirrored my life. I will read their role in the video-essay through the lens of Walter Benjamin’s concept of ‘unconscious optics’.

Walter Benjamin wrote about ‘unconscious optics’ for the first time in his 1931 essay titled “*A Short History of Photography*” and later in the essay “*The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*” (1936). For Benjamin, unconscious optics refers to the invisible which is present in the visible. Benjamin stated that, although invisible to the human eye, the horse movements recorded by Eadweard Muybridge’s cameras had become visible due to the effect of the camera. He subsequently suggested that psychoanalysis could be seen as a ‘camera’ looking at the unconscious. He wrote: “The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (Benjamin 1936 in Hirsch 1997: 117).

By comparing the unconscious optics brought by cinema to the role psychoanalysis had in discovering and enabling the verbalisation of our unconscious, Benjamin discussed for the first time in his essays the complex layers of meaning engrained in the act of seeing. As Marianne Hirsch says in her book “*Family Frames: photography, narrative and the post-memory*” (1997): “Benjamin’s notion of



'unconscious optics' intervenes in this development of photography in paradoxical ways. On the one hand, unconscious optics are the result of technical advances that offer ever greater mimetic possibilities. On the other, they expose, or at least hint at, the invisible behind and inside the transparently visible, not just the unseen, but that which is unavailable to sight" (ibid: 119).

By reading my inclusion of old films in *(un)childhood* through the eyes of the concept of 'unconscious optics', one can say that these films retrospectively evoke in the video-essay the unconscious optic processes of my past childhood. As a child, when viewing those films, I had identified with their fictional child characters due to the films subtle stories of 'pedagogical' oppression. By relating, through the split screen, the old films in *(un)childhood* to contemporary clips, and by commenting on those images through written subtitles, I voice out and interpret both my childhood memories of oppression as well as how those filmic visual representations enabled me, in the past, to "see" my childhood experiences.

The first appearance of "Fanny and Alexander" (1982) in the video-essay is on the left screen (35'01"). In that scene the child Alexander runs through the corridor of his early 20<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois home with his back turned to the spectator. That image is related to one of the living room of my childhood home, visible on the right screen. When Alexander reaches the end of the corridor, another sequence starts where my son Mateus walks through the corridor of our Lisbon home toward the spectator. He then looks seriously at the screen and tells me to stop filming. In the next moment, the film character Alexander comes back through the same corridor. The whole sequence of images is commented on by a text in subtitles (starting at 35'03"). The silent text, which conveys my inner thoughts, says the following: *"In my memory, films were a screen on which I projected my changing self. I am not looking at childhood anymore. I still can't talk with him. I want to talk to him and with men. He is also my embodied*

*culture. I had to look at childhood. I don't want to look anymore. I want to relate to (un)childhood. Relating to means knowledge, love, today. Images exist just now, re-enacted, projected on screens, and lived in bodies."*

The split screen device functions in this sequence as a deferring mirror that doesn't just reflect my own image, for it transforms it into something similar yet also different by establishing a series of relational identities: I am Alexander, that is my son, that is me.



Figure 23: Still from *(un)childhood*

Through the use of fictional films, *(un)childhood* shows how childhood is an experience constructed and mediated by cinematic representations. The films I have chosen were the ones I mostly identified with, due to the particularities of my own experiences, which are unique, but also the experiences that marked the childhood of my particular generation. If TV and fictional films were the most important visual technologies that participated in the construction of my identity as a child, what participates now in the construction of my son's identity is the Internet, particularly YouTube. By including both excerpts from the most meaningful films of my own childhood, as well as my son's favourite vlogs and music YouTube videos, all done by Mateus, *(un)childhood* portrays how childhood and one's own childhood memories are

relationally interwoven with media representations. It also alludes to how, in one single generation, media representation has changed radically from being fabricated exclusively by adults, to being fabricated by children and teenagers who are now increasingly able to use film and the Internet to represent, broadcast and entertain themselves.

### *Re-enacting the past through the family archive*

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As explained in Chapter 3, part of my methodology was to use an archive of super-8 films and old photographs of my childhood, done by my father and uncle. These films allude to how family representational practices, such as home movies and amateur photography, play a role in the cultural construction of childhood.

Our home movies recorded what was most common in the home movie movement: the depiction of family and childhood, as Patricia Zimmerman writes in her book *“Reel Families: a social history of amateur film”* (1995). Home movies provided images of “togetherness, family harmony, children and travel into a performance of familialism” (ibid: 133); they also served as a way to show the “institutionalisation of the family as a natural construct preserved the ideology of the patriarch in total control of his family, if not his work life” (ibid: 134). Usually shot only by the family’s adult men, they reinforced “the patriarchal character of the nuclear families” (ibid).

In *(un)childhood* the excerpts taken from the super-8 films function as fragments of memories. These are approached dynamically and related, through the split screen, to contemporary clips filmed in the same house, recording the same kinds of family moments. Contemporary and old films are dispersed in different moments of the film.

A super-8 film of my sisters and me, for example, shows three girls dancing ballet in the large living room (35’36”), under the watchful eye of the parent (off-screen)

and the smiling maid. At another moment I dance with my son and niece in the same living room. One particular sequence is important: an image of me as a child, recorded by my father, appearing on the right screen (30'15"). That image is displayed beside a clip of a wooden bridge by the sea being slowly covered with fog. Walking through that bridge in the fog are Mateus and his own father. In the old film I appear as a child, looking very seriously at the camera, and speaking some words, which are unintelligible due to the lack of sound. I hold my grandfather's stick in my hand and balance it energetically. My display of defiance towards the one filming, who is the father, is juxtaposed to the image of togetherness performed by Mateus and his father walking by the bridge. The old clip has no sound to work with, so I choose the words and voice of Wim Wenders (30'15") to complement my own childhood image as a defiant ten year old. Over the images we hear: *"I don't want to do anything else that isn't an act of love anymore."*

The use of those words in that particular section hint as to what is my main ideological parental approach to childhood – an approach which is present throughout the whole film: communion, dialogue and acceptance, in the midst of a close relationship with the child. As I have previously addressed, I am aware that my effort to abandon generational separation and power struggles endangers the film into obscuring the reality of the differences in agency and power that evidently exist between a child and an adult.

#### 4. The relational voice

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In *(un)childhood* 'I' versus 'you', the adult's voice versus the child's, swiftly shifts to the voice of 'we'. Childhood is performed by the dynamic co-action of a plural

relational voice, as I have learned over the course of this project. I tried to convey this relational voice through the multi-layering of voices and sounds.

The voice of the relationship as the one constructing childhood is clearly alluded to in the film, in a query heard at the beginning of the film and expressed by a dual voice, a man and a woman's:

*"When did the 'I' happen? I just know that when I was transforming myself into a 'we' because 'you' were inside of me, 'I' had no language. If 'I' had a language – 'you' see? – the language of the future, the time ahead, 'you' would be a different person. 'I' would be a different person."* (00'42")

That different person, a plural person, (the result of all the participants in the film) is present throughout the video-essay, performing a proposition of a 'relational being' as the one responsible for the relational voice. Psychologist Kenneth Gergen, describes his concept of the 'relational being' in his book *"Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community"* (2009), which puts forward a relational account of the human mind, reconstituting 'the mind' as a manifestation of relationships. His standpoint is that the relational process exists prior to the very concept of the individual. Gergen's proposal breaks with the individualist tradition wherein the rational agent or autonomous self is considered the fundamental atom of social life. He writes: "if we can suspend the assumption of minds within heads, we enter a clearing in which we can significantly expand the vision of relational being" (ibid: 69). His request is not to abandon the vocabulary of mental states structured with 'I' – 'I think', 'I need', 'I love' – but to broaden our understanding of its relational basis. For Gergen, "our mental vocabulary is essentially a vocabulary of relationship" (ibid: 70). He puts forward four proposals which help us understand the entire mental vocabulary as relational in origins and functions: mental discourse originates in human relationships; mental discourse functions in the service of relationship; mental discourse is action within

relationship and such action is a “culturally prescribed performance” (ibid: 75); discursive action is embedded in traditions of co-action.

By interpreting *(un)childhood* through the lens of Gergen’s text, one can say that the video-essay, which could be seen as the visualisation of mental discourse, constructs childhood as resulting from a similar kind of “relational performances, that is actions with or for the others” (ibid: 73). The voices of my son, my friends, other children, film characters, my own voice, in co-action with each other, perform discourses of childhood. Kenneth Gergen writes in his book: “As we find, rational thoughts, intentions, experience, memory and creativity are not prior to relational life, but are born within relationships. They are not ‘in the mind’ – separated from the world and from others – but embodied actions that are fashioned and sustained within relationships” (ibid: 95).

In the video-essay, the relational voice gains a unity in itself, and the singular one vanishes into the background. Childhood is constructed as if it were a knit pattern that connects the embodied actions of people, complexly interlacing among themselves, with their remarks and behaviours, their performances, discourses in action about childhood in its infinite details. We perform, in the video-essay, our experiences as embodied discourses about childhood. The relational nature of discourse is even self-reflexively alluded to at various times in the film. For example, in a conversation with my friend António (25’43”), I appear in the diegetic space to explain how autobiographical memory works. At another moment (28’06”), a conversation about the first emotion of love is related to a lecture by the philosopher Michael Hardt about love, which is shown overlapping a travel sequence, thereby evoking the mind’s relational thinking processes, in permanent flux and beyond one’s singular brain.

The co-existence of many points of view and the subtitles invites the audience to undertake silent co-action. The film ‘zooms in’, showing concrete and intimate

moments from our lives and 'zooms out' into the overall picture, weaved by a complex fabric of interlaced voices. Looking at the whole film, we understand its relational voice and as spectators we feel impelled to participate in it. It is the dynamic combination of all our actions that construct childhood as a fluid cultural construction which is seen as a whole that repeats a pattern yet is ever changing, which is the "creative nature of performance" (del Rio 2014: 4). *(un)childhood* is a fluid text enabling multiple relations inside and outside the text, depending on attention and perception. But the voice of the relationship, as the one constructing childhood, is its main point of view.

#### 5. *(un)childhood: playing with the unknown*

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Why is the film called *(un)childhood*? In Claudia Castañeda's book *Childhood Figurations* (2002), which concerned symbolic meanings conveyed by the figure of the child, the writer asks the reader what responsibilities are involved in making claims about the child. And she offers a suggestion: "I wish to suggest that worlds could be made otherwise, precisely through some form of *un-knowing*" (ibid: 10-11).

The title of *(un)childhood* results from this idea of *un-knowing*. The unknown here means something different: both what is impossible to decipher and the creative possibilities of constructing childhood depending on what type of relationship one wishes to sustain. Looking for an example in my identity as parent, we can see how the film alludes to a certain kind of relationship embedded in a given tradition, as the main projector of the childhood experience and also as an experimentalist that plays with such traditions and creatively performs in the film other alternatives, like the ones of a playing parent, or playing the child. The title *(un)childhood* therefore alludes to experimentation and creativity, which also symbolises rebirth, a second chance, which are alluded to in the film, through both imagery and dialogue.

In *(un)childhood*, the unknown possibilities of childhood are also evidenced, self-reflexively, in its allegory of the volatile process of reconstruction of childhood happening in culture. Cyclically, the film starts and finishes, either by dissolving into the flickering noise of the digital video signal, the colour bars, the numbers of the celluloid film – the *(un)video* – or vice versa, by gaining life as an increasingly coloured moving and speaking image, the *video*.

In the 1997 new edition of the book *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* by James and Prout, the authors emphasise the processual spirit implicit in any cultural construction such as that of childhood: “The making and breaking of concepts of childhood is in itself a continuing and changing social activity in which people themselves – men, women and children, are created, facilitated and constrained” (1997: 228).

*(un)childhood* visualises the processual spirit of childhood, when repeatedly dissolving the *video* into the *(un)video*, understood here as the point zero where all potential for filmic creation resides, in a moment of pause, waiting to be awakened and transformed into moving images, through relationship.

## Conclusion

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This chapter has described how the video essay *(un)childhood* performs the voices of childhood through a relational voice that combines in itself the viewpoint of the child, that of the adult, and that of the relation. In the film, a clear symbol of its relational nature is conveyed by the split screen, which constantly reminds the viewer how the film expresses the interplay of a plural subjectivity. Its various play moments and conversations also place the focus on the relational voice as the one performing



childhood. The video-essay can thus be categorised as a first-person film expressing a first-person plural subjectivity.

The child's voice has a political nature, as it is voice that empowers the child with a specific identity as an active human being, capable of critical reasoning and creative potential, in collaboration. The adult's voice (my own), constructs in the film the subjectivity of the parent as the main programmer of childhood, albeit having to negotiate with the child, by being willing to experiment with vulnerability. The adult is as well an individual carrying a particular set of past childhood memories. The adult's subjectivity is performed embedded in a web of relations, as my memories and conceptions of parenthood are discussed in shared conversations with friends who narrate their own stories and memories. Childhood memory is also tackled through visual imagery, again through a relational process, as the film compares excerpts from films that mirrored my experiences of childhood to a personal family archive of old photos and super-8 films, and to contemporary clips. Such images are commented on with the spectator through subtitles inviting the spectator to participate in a silent dialogue.

One can say that the film performs the processes through which ideas of childhood are embedded in our bodies' voices and actions and how such actions and utterances change over time. I conclude the chapter by explaining how the title *(un)childhood* comes from a desire to indicate how childhood, like any other cultural concept, still contains within itself an unknowable aspect. The next chapter will describe how *(un)childhood* approaches time.

## CHAPTER 5 Performing the Relational Times of Childhood in the Video-essay

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### Introduction

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As explained in previous chapters, time is one of the most important axes around which artists have structured their time-based art projects concerning childhood. In the book *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* (1990), sociologists Allison James and Alan Prout described how notions of time are key elements for the cultural construction of childhood, by distinguishing two main time types: first we have 'time of childhood' and second we have 'time in childhood'. In the authors' opinion the "time of childhood" tends to be prioritised in research about childhood. Artist-parents working with children in time-based art projects have tended to follow the trends described by James and Prout.

The video-essay *(un)childhood* approaches 'time' differently, as its non-chronological nature breaks with the classic idea of linear homogeneous time. In *(un)childhood*, through both montage (fragmentation, repetition, pauses, delays) and voice, multiple temporal dimensions co-exist and are dynamically related to and intertwined with each other by multi-layering images, sounds and text in a split screen. The video-essay thus performs the relational times of Childhood. Because of its non-chronological character, the video-essay disrupts the developmental paradigm, which is profoundly evident in the other projects, structured as they are around a single subject (the child) and around the portrayal of linear temporality which arranges the past (evoking the primitive) and future (progress and civilisation) in a hierarchic manner as the main structuring characteristics of childhood. The video-essay breaks as well with the pastoral/salvage paradigm that tended to favour a romanticized representation of childhood.

The video-essay plays with all the temporal dimensions. The *past* is conjured up either through talks with friends about childhood memory and by the inclusion of tiny excerpts from various early films by the Lumière brothers and others, as well as old films and photographs from my own childhood; the *past* is related to the *present* and sometimes to the *future*, as is the case in a discussion with a friend where we talk about how our past projects condition the future events of our lives. The *present* is tackled in clips from daily life, and in moments of play or dialogue. The *present* brings to the project the missing 'time in childhood', conveyed by clips of daily life, play and conversations happening between the children and myself, thereby situating childhood in connection to the adult world.

Finally the video-essay displays the dimension of the *timeless* through various allegorical strategies, such as the use of mythical images of children in natural landscapes, ones that traditionally suggested childhood's *timeless dimension*, or by using the digital video colour bars, short sequences of black frames, digital noise or the texture of celluloid, as metaphors of the potential of filmic imagery. It is from these *non-image* sequences that the video-essay always emerges, as a loop comprising many short loops, symbolising a circular temporality.

## 1. 'Childhood times': the way time has been used to construct childhood

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"Children are often regarded as unformed versions of the adults, and their activities are mere rehearsals for the society in which they will live. Their world is often seen as a vision of the world to come. This is partly because they are fascinated by their own discoveries, which become fixated on the fashions and preoccupations of children a little older than themselves. But children are also a vision of the past, for they summon up the prehistory of all adults. In children, adults see the beginnings of a future that they already largely spent and often squandered (MacDougall 2006: 91)".

In previous chapters I have explained how "time" is an important concept in the cultural construction of childhood. As mentioned in Chapter 1, in the book *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* (1990) James and Prout describe two ways in which time is used in childhood: one is 'time of childhood', corresponding to the inherent process of biological change over time with the concurrent process of growth and aging; the second is 'time in childhood', which concerns the manners "in which time is used effectively to produce, control and order the everyday lives of children" (ibid: 217). On the other hand, 'time of childhood' is a social construction which is the product of "past, present and future conceptualisations of what a child used to be or is" (ibid: 220). The authors' argument is that due to a focus on 'the time of childhood', there is a lack of 'present' in academic studies of childhood, since the "present of childhood is systematically down-played in favour of theoretical frames of reference which place the importance of childhood in either the past or the future" (ibid: 220). We place childhood in the 'past' when we look at childhood as memories, as a "time to look back upon during later life" (ibid: 225). Recalling early childhood moments when browsing through old family albums, or viewing old super-8 family films, is an example of the ways in which we construct childhood using memorabilia. The future is likewise a very important dimension for constructing childhood.

James and Prout write: "It is children, rather than 'fate', 'gods' or 'demons' who will most likely endure to shape and participate in any future social world: they are the 'next generation', the 'guardians of the future' on whose shoulders time itself sits" (ibid: 226). Such a notion is constructed when one plans the future of one's child, influenced by the social reinforcing notion of children as citizens of the future. The timeless is conveyed in representations of childhood that are both "enduring and universal" (ibid: 228). According to Prout, timeless space is constructed "as if it were to the side of mainstream (that is adult) history and culture" (ibid). The timeless or eternal time is thus suggested with images of happy children playing in scenic natural landscapes convey the iconography of the garden of Eden, inhabited by uncorrupted 'innocent beings'.

These three kinds of temporal dimensions construct childhood in such a way that children are left "stranded in a kind of time warp" (1990: 229), which can be limiting. Citing Boa (1966), James and Prout indicate how this use of time can be seen as a form of cultural primitivism. It also corresponds to the way culture longs and feels "a nostalgia for time passed which sees 'the child' (a resonant symbol for children in which children themselves have to negotiate in their everyday lives) as inhabiting a timeless cultural space. Like primitive man, the child as primitive adults in harmony with nature, set free from the ravages of time driven modern world" (ibid: 229). But there are dangers haunting the notion of the 'timeless culture of childhood'. James and Prout state that in the 1970s social science's goal of moving beyond the tradition of looking at children as "passive bystanders in discussions about the socialisation process" (ibid) led scholars to set up a model of childhood embedded in a "time-capsule" (ibid: 230).

While on the one hand the model was important as a vehicle that enabled “incorporating children within the discourses of social scientists” (ibid), on the other it reinforced the romantic idea that there is a “cultural autonomy of childhood from adult society” (ibid: 231).

Such an approach to childhood also affected visual representation, as exemplified in David MacDougall’s essays reflecting on his work as a visual anthropologist interested in studying childhood. In his book *Film, Ethnography, and the Senses, the Corporeal Image (2006)* the author describes how “an adult often feels as much as an outsider among children as a visitor in a foreign land. Membership in childhood is limited and nonrenewable (...). At best, adults gain a kind of provisional access to children’s affairs.” (ibid: 141).

The issue is that by setting childhood in a time capsule, one falsely constructs childhood “as separate (conceptually and physically) from the adult world” (James and Prout 1990: 230). James and Prout’s proposal is therefore to work with temporality in such a way that it enables social and cultural construction of childhood that situates childhood “within, rather than outside, the world of adults” (ibid: 231). They believe that this would be possible due to the placement of children in the present. But the authors acknowledge that placing children favouring the “present” raises other kinds of risks and challenges.

One of those dangers is the one of allocating them an “ethnographic present”, in the words of Johannes Fabian, which “allochronically fixes them: it takes them out of the flow of time into a limbo” (Fabian 1983 in James and Prout 1990: 231). It might be possible to resolve this conundrum if we could grasp childhood as being a “continually experienced and created social phenomenon which has significance for its present, as well as the past and future” (ibid: 231), leading to the conception of children “as active beings in a social world at all points in their growth and development” (ibid: 233).

When looking at time-based media art works about childhood, one can visibly see how artists have tended to use the more traditional three temporal constructions described previously. In Mary Kelly's "Post Partum Document" (PPD) project, one finds, for example, a conception of childhood as past memorabilia. From 1969 until 1975 the artist created six consecutive documents covering the first six years of life of her son. They mix narrative elements produced by the artist, drawn from her diary, with memorabilia from her son's childhood, such as nappies, a clay model of his pacifiers, his drawings and first writing attempts, along with his 'gifts' to his mother, the artist. The documents are organised and displayed chronologically. The project can be read using filmic language, with a linear and diary-related approach to temporality, where her child acted as an allegory of the primitive subject subjected to civilisation.

The experimental filmmakers Erik Bullot and Ernie Gehr worked with their children for several years, aiming to investigate the origins of filmmaking, in what Noël Burch entitled rather controversially as 'primitive film'. Both filmmakers aimed to investigate the original film techniques used in early cinema, through their editing and filming practices. Their films display the changing faces of their sons, filmed for several years, from the time they were new-borns and as they gradually grow up over the course of various years. Their projects, as explained in Chapter 2, can be read as allegories that evoke the ethnographical pastoral/salvage paradigm, first described by James Clifford in his essay *On Ethnographical Allegory* (1986).

The pastoral paradigm is a "cyclic cultural pattern of looking back into the past as a move that is searching for a place where authentic social and natural contacts were once possible" (ibid: 114). The urge to look for such a space, the Garden of Eden, is driven by a search for a 'wholeness' that cannot be attained in our contemporary times, seen as fostering a sensation of fragmented self. According to Clifford "wholeness by definition becomes a thing of the past (rural, primitive, childlike) (ibid).

Experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage also worked with the idea of the timeless, the past and the future. In his project *Scenes from Under Childhood* he filmed and edited footage of his children from birth on, in chronological order. Brakhage's aim was to investigate the development of vision and perception. He used an original editing process that consisted of scratching, painting and the double exposure of the celluloid to be able to evoke the timeless and the past, which are also conveyed via his approach to mythological themes such as the origins of life, death, birth, sexuality and creativity.

The time-based art projects of Mary Kelly, Brakhage, Gehr and Bulloot, produced respectively during the 1960s, 1970s, 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, all approached childhood through the chronological display of their children's growth processes. They tended to privilege the time dimensions of the past and timeless limbo (particularly Bulloot and Brakhage) by displaying children playing in the set ups that evoke the garden of paradise, conveyed by images of forests, mountains, and other natural landscapes. Finally their use of a progressive chronological time alludes to the temporal dimension of the future.

Yet their use of chronological time can also be interpreted from another standpoint: as instilling in their projects what several scholars have described as classic cinematic time, shaped by "continuities, durations and logical motivations" (Corrigan, 2011:134). In his analysis of how cinema uses time, Timothy Corrigan states in his book *The Essay Film* (2011):

"As numerous scholars have pointed out, cinematic time has been mapped and theorised, fairly consistently, as a temporality of continuities, durations, and logical motivations subjected to what Erwin Panofsky calls (borrowing from Henry Bergson) 'the spatialisation of time' (218) or what Bazin has described as 'embalmed time' ("Ontology" 14)" (Corrigan, 2011:134).



In the aforementioned projects the motive is one of progressive unilateral growth, the growth that enables the development of the child.

## 2. The relational times of the video-essay *(un)childhood*

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*(un)childhood's* approach to time differs considerably from the projects reviewed in chapters one and two by breaking with the traditional temporal consistency of the other projects.

The video-essay is thus strongly non-chronological, structured around the idea of a loop comprising many irregular short loops. Due to its non-chronological nature the film presents time's multiple dimensions interwoven via montage and the use of symbolic imagery, with repetitions, suspensions, accelerations and interruptions. Second, the film literally alludes to time through voice, by discussing the concept self-reflexively, directly and indirectly, either in conversations about memories or in colloquial "philosophical" conversations with friends. The video-essay uses the multi-layering of images and sounds as one of its key techniques. Concerning time, it is that multi-layering that enables the video-essay to include and relate to each other all the temporal dimensions that construct childhood: both the present times-in childhood, and the times of childhood mentioned by James and Prout (1990). The video-essay doesn't privilege or excludes any of the dimensions, but rather opts to relate all of them to each other. The multi-layering of all the dimensions (present, past, future and timeless) enables the video-essay to display childhood "within, rather than outside, the world of adults" (Prout 1990: 231).

The approach to time existent in *(un)childhood* can be interpreted as inserted in a more contemporary trend which, according to Timothy Corrigan (2012), emerged after the 1940s in post-war Europe. The same author asserts that a new world shaped

by the subsequent contemporary screen cultures of film, television and then computers began to reflect itself in film with the possibilities and imperatives associated to “temporal multiplicity, acceleration and fracturing” (ibid: 139).

### Performing time through voice

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I believe that owing to my initial aim to include the child’s voice in relation to the adult’s one – my own, the video-essay displays the intersection of two separate and strong different time zones: the one peculiar to each of its participants’ subjectivities. But one can state that due to the focus on dialogue and play, those different temporalities merge into a relational one. The video-essay performs entangled, relational time, resulting from the actions/performances (discourses, conversations, play) established between its participants. The video-essay visualises how those performances are shaped by current and past discourses about childhood, present daily life experiences and the hopes and creative ideas for the future (the expectations one has for what childhood should be).

In *(un)childhood* the subjects perform themselves as relational thinking subjectivities, embedded in a temporally layered landscape, travelling through non-linear time, going back to the past to reflect about memories, narrating those memories in the present moment and addressing expectations of a future to come. Through conversation and play, the ‘now’ emerges in the film as an ‘immediate’ construction that, while made in the present moment and responding to the daily issues of the present, nevertheless is the result of all other temporal dimensions. One can thus say that the film’s temporal multidimensionality contributes to its performance of times in childhood, via a relational point of view.

"Where is it, this present?"

"It has melted in our grasp fled where we could touch it, gone in the instant of becoming." *William James*

In *(Un)childhood* the temporal dimension of the present is evoked in many sequences of conversations and play. The way time works in such sequences adapts to the context of the video-essay the tradition of a use of time in the way of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema. Reviewing the use of time in documentary cinema, and *cinéma vérité*, Timothy Corrigan (2012) states the following: "As significant swerves from these more classical documentary temporalities, even the films of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema, such as Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's chronicle of a summer (1961), are less about subjecting the varieties of time to thought than about recasting documentary time as a relatively unified performative immediacy" (ibid: 137).

The performative immediacy of the present is introduced in the film by means of various strategies. One of them is via the inclusion of long excerpts of conversations and play that happen between children and adults, which are displayed as having unique subjectivities and stories. These long clips allude in a detailed way to the joys and struggles of common daily life, and function as indexes of reality. Even though the video-essay is constructed through a multi-layering all the different temporalities it is my display of the present, in a slow and detailed way, that enables the viewer to fill the dimension of the present in an immersive way. My approach to the dimension of the present is therefore completely different from Stan Brakhage's, who has approached time in his films in a somewhat similar way to *(un)childhood*. Just as Brakhage, I have used multi-layering as a key editing technique. But Brakhage's use of quick fragmentation, lack of voice and his tendency to edit some of his films in a

chronological way, can be said to downplay the details of the present and the display of the subjectivities of his children. His films gain a dream-like abstract atmosphere, which is radically different from the one of *(un)childhood*.

In *(un)childhood*, due to the conversational nature of our interactions, the present's immediacy has embedded other temporalities in itself. For example, in the excerpt at minute 16'35", my son and I recall the most beautiful days of our lives, which obviously happened in the past. Another interesting clip is the one where we speak about dreams (time code at 43' 17"), both commenting on the desires and struggles of the present and our hopes for the future. In *(un)childhood* the concrete present times in childhood are evoked very clearly as being times where children participate actively.

The present thus functions as the point/moment into which all other dimensions disembark. This is especially visible in the sequences displaying conversations with my friend Antonio. Through dialogue and discourse, the past and future dimensions are brought to the present moment. It is via voice and discourse in action that we construct embedded and relational time.

The video-essay's circular nature (its structure is a large loop built with many small and variable loops) also alludes to a 'now' that begins and vanishes all the time. The circularity of *(un)childhood* is obtained through interruptions, reverse motions, pauses, repetitions and text frames stating "let me begin once again". It is this permanent initiation that continuously pulls the film back to the present moment.

#### [Relating the future to the present: utopia and parenthood](#)

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As in the projects reviewed previously, the video-essay *(un)childhood* expresses a notion of the future as grounding the cultural construction of childhood. That stance is strongly linked to the tradition of viewing the child (and childhood) as "a parental project" (Castañeda, 2012 76). As "programmers" of childhood, parents can

even become utopian, as Stan Brakhage stated in an interview about his work to Scott MacDonald (1997). Ultimately, as parents, we tend to participate in a tradition of constructing childhood as symbolising all the utopian possibilities of a future for our children that we as parents, hopefully visualise as being brighter than our own.

The singular stance put forward in *(un)childhood* concerning the future is that the film reflexively and relationally thinks through this temporal dimension by commenting on its inherent utopian nature, which is thus brought to light and discussed in the film's diegetic space, both through allegorical imagery and in conversations with others.

### *Utopia lies in the future*

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There is a sequence in the film, which I call *Utopia* (between time code at 05'36" until 06'39"). It opens with a fade to a beautiful image of a Stockholm sunset on the left screen, while the right screen shows a clip of a Swedish cartoon of dawn over Stockholm roofs. In a fast-flowing sequence, the film then shows poetic images of flying white pigeons fading into covers of books with the word 'utopia'; quick frames of a child before the sea with a sword; a hand in the process of writing a poem; and images of a newborn. With this kind of imagery allegorising symbolic meanings, the film transmits the idea of childhood as symbol of the future, of infinite possibilities and utopian dreams. But the romanticism of such a vision is broken by the inclusion of my own voice, present as a text in subtitles stating the following:

"I have been changing. I was fond of utopias, books, images. A new body was like a utopia, I thought. He was and he was not. He was the future and he existed now. He was a becoming and a human being; I was a becoming and a human being. Emotions change utopia, contradictory drives and desires, played as time goes by. In uchronia, there is no time. Another is known and unknown; he is us and not us. We walk together. We relate to each other. We still need projects, experiments" (time code at 4'48").

The subtitles directly comment on the poetic imagery shown, narrating a personal story of how I dismantled the ideal of childhood as a futuristic one-sided utopia, through the process of facing the contingencies of daily life and the need to deal with another human being (my son) holding a specific agency and free will. This personal text also allude to how my initial ideals for this project changed radically through the experience of putting it into practice. As explained previously, if I aimed to include the perspective and point of view of the child, my experience made me face the fact that my son was much less interested in this project as I was. We had, in many moments of our collaboration, contradictory drives.

#### *Talking about the future by looking at the past*

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“What about now? Was the future a light cone that could be forecast?”  
( *(un)childhood* at time code 38’44”)

Halfway through the video-essay the silent voice asks the spectator about the future while the video fades into moving images of snow-covered Sweden taken from a train window. As the train images continue on the right screen, the left one shows my friend António sitting on a sofa while talking to me off-screen. Picking up on an earlier conversation about the future, I tell António that even though I believe in the notion of the future as a dark future, I remember that when I was a child I had the dream of moving to Sweden. In my childhood, marked by political discussions about the various major alternatives, Sweden’s political model of social democracy took on the fictional and utopian aspect of a dreamland.

When I moved to Sweden in 2007 I was therefore fulfilling a *past* childhood dream, which I always thought would be fulfilled in my *future* as an adult. But as soon as I moved to Sweden, as I tell António in a sequence at time code 39’03”, my utopia gained real space to express itself, as it became embodied in real people, which

immediately meant it was not a utopia. My past dream had nevertheless conditioned my child's *future*.



Figure 24: still from *(un)childhood*

Through the display of this dialogue, the video-essay reflects how, even though one as a parent attempts to instil our projects and ideas in other bodies, particularly those of our children, those projects change over time. By focusing in the present, the now, one becomes deeply aware that there is a blend of one's own desires and those of the other. 'Now' becomes the time of negotiating relationship. Past subjectivities and views of the world adjust to new ones, anticipating others to come.

Beyond aiming for utopia, which relentlessly lies in the future, the video-essay suggests then the possibility of '*uchronia*' (beyond time) in a sequence of a child holding hands with an adult, walking on a bridge amid a deep fog (time code at 30'09"). Uchronia is a timeless a-historical *(un)space* where all things are possibilities. One of them is the renewal and reshaping of what childhood is with respect to parenthood (which is, ironically, an utopian ideal).

#### [Un-making the diary: the timeless dimension of \*\(un\)childhood\*](#)

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'Uchronia' thus allegorises the timeless, which in several ways is very present in the video-essay. One of those ways, is via the colour bars of the digital signal to which the film recurrently returns or comes out of. The digital signal colour bars, the black

frames and the digital remediated version of the celluloid film can be seen as allegorising alternative versions of the timeless. In *(un)childhood* the timeless aspect is not situated in the past as evoked by the garden of paradise, or by the image of the innocent new-born, as per my predecessors, thereby bluntly evoking the romantic visions of childhood and the myth of primitivism, but rather via the more neutral symbol of electronic imagery that anticipates a cinematic experience. The timeless is thus conveyed as the neutral source (the “no time” and “no space” of awareness as a non-local field of possibilities) out of which anyone who is willing to engage in a relationship is able to do so.

Repetitive frames of text saying, “let’s begin once again” construct the film as containing many internal sub-loops that constantly interrupt its linear flow. The whole film is also a loop, as anyone can view it by starting at any point. This clear allusion to circular temporality can easily be identified in one specific sequence that interweaves a conversation with António about the meaning of death with images of a baby being born.



Figure 25: still from *(un)childhood*



The film's structure breaks and un-makes the linear 'diary', particularly by relating its various time dimensions to each other through fragmentation, juxtaposition and other montage techniques. The video-essay abandons its diarist aspect, subtly alluding to the film collage.

### Visualising the past through memory

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The past in the film is also strongly connected to childhood memory, through both the use of visual imagery and voice, in shared conversations either about childhood recollections or about events that happened in the past. Visual imagery alluding to the past is strikingly present in the contemporary clips of Mateus playing in beautiful landscapes such as parks or gardens or by the sea, referring to the most cherished myth of childhood: children as innocent beings playing in the garden of paradise. The past is also conjured up via a voice talking about childhood memories in conversations with various adult friends, as it is the case in a sequence of different people narrating their first childhood recollections (time code at 13'15").

Allusions to the past also exist in old films and photographs of my own childhood and in excerpts from early films by the Lumière brothers, Georges Méliès's film *Trip to the Moon* and Eadweard Muybridge's first experiments with moving images using his Zoopraxiscope. But when relating contemporary clips to excerpts from Lumière brothers' films, through the split screen, the video-essay self-reflexively makes a silent commentary about past trends of portraying childhood in film as metaphors of early cinema and children's growing bodies as symbols of primitive subjects becoming progressively civilized.

Writing about found footage as a radical archival practice, Catherine Russell mentions how “by means of montage (a technique that is neither strictly modern nor postmodern in this reading), the past is transformed from a fixed space of forgetting to a dynamic space of historical imagination. The past is the allegorical form of the future, as it is in found-footage filmmaking” (ibid: 253).

By means of editing strategies such as interruptions, juxtapositions and silent commentary (the subtitles), the past is thus positioned in the film in permanent and dynamic relationship with the other temporal dimensions.

## Conclusion

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Time is said to be one the key structuring elements in art projects concerning childhood. Allison James and Alan Prout, who have analysed how time is used to construct childhood, described two types of times as those mainly used to construct childhood: the ‘time of childhood’ and ‘times in childhood’. Those authors assert that the ‘times of childhood’, the future, the past and the timeless, have downplayed the presence of the present in children’s lives. They suggest that by working with temporality in a different manner, “as a continually experienced and created social phenomenon which has significance for its present, as well as the past and future” (ibid: 231)”, children’s points of views could be perceived and childhood could become more located “within, rather than outside, the world of adults” (ibid: 231). The chapter reviews how artist-parents have followed the tendency to construct art projects that evoke the dimensions of the past, the future, and the timeless, to then give evidence how *(un)childhood* takes a different stance regarding time in two ways: First, by showing the active and dynamic presence of children in the present, in long clips that display children in close communication and interconnection with the adults around

them. Second, by working with the concept of time in a relational way. The video-essay displays all the temporal possibilities that construct childhood profoundly entangled with each other, and how the behaviour and actions of people with respect to each other re-enact those temporalities – the past, the present, the future and the timeless – as relating to each other. Therein lies my video-essay's original contribution: to perform the relational times of childhood, and how those relational times are embodied in the interactions of both adults and children. It is those relational times that enable the construction of childhood as a dynamic concept undergoing permanent reconstruction as time flies by.

## Conclusion

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In the summer of 2013 I finished the video-essay *(un)childhood*, editing its final draft in the library of my childhood home in Lisbon. That house was also the site where, over a period of four and a half years, I filmed many of the play moments and conversations with my son, my nephews and friends who participated in the project. We filmed in the large living room, the library and the garden where we had played so many times under its large bougainvillea tree. In that same summer, in the living room, Mateus also recorded most of his vlogs for his YouTube channel. The house's various rooms and garden appear repeatedly in the video-essay, especially two rooms in particular: my father's library and the living room with its old-fashioned furniture. These two rooms are located in opposite corners of the house, connected by a long corridor.

I was born in that house and both my son and I spent part of our childhood there. Mateus lived there with me until he turned four; then we moved to Sweden. After that, the house became our holiday residence. It was during those holidays that we started to film and play. At the end of the summer of 2013 I returned to London and the house stayed empty. The following winter, the ceiling fell in, the bougainvillea tree was cut down, and we ended up selling the house. Its participation in our family history came to an end. I now imagine its silence and stillness, so different from the house shown in the video-essay, forever enlivened by voices: those of my son, my family, little nephews and friends, other film characters and myself.

My aim with this project was to produce a video-essay about childhood that would include the child's point of view and subjectivity, along with my own as an adult who was also a parent. My desire to include the subjectivity of the child came in the wake of new discourses about childhood in the field of the "new sociology of childhood" (James and Prout, 1990,1997). James and Prout proposed to view and study children as "competent social actors" (1990: 15). These academics had also discovered that there

was a certain temporal approach to childhood that tended to favour dimensions of the past, the future and the timeless, downplaying the importance of the present. Their proposal was that it was important to work with temporality in such a way that it could enable a social and cultural construction of childhood that paid more attention to the present, meaning the daily lives of children. This would situate childhood “within, rather than outside, the world of adults” (1990: 231).

Additionally, the aim of including my own subjectivity in the project resulted from a strong personal understanding that my identity as a parent needed to be clearly recognized. I was following contemporary parenting standards that reinforce the interconnectedness of the world of both children and adults.

Having investigated time-based artistic projects undertaken by artist-parents, concerning childhood, I became aware how artists tended to identify so much with their children, that they represented children as aesthetical objects bearing no voice, and seen exclusively through the adult’s eyes. As Patricia Holland writes, in *Picturing Childhood* (2004), children have always been the “objects of imagery, very rarely its makers” (ibid: 20).

I had found a gap in knowledge, thus I aimed to find an answer to my research questions, which were: Through what ways can children actively participate and collaborate in the artistic process? How can the child’s subjectivity and point of view be included in a video-essay dedicated to childhood and how can their point of view be conjoined with my own, as an adult?

For four and a half years I collaborated artistically with my son on a regular basis, using a methodology that I have labelled ‘relational video-making’. Our collaborative process resulted in a 53-minute video-essay titled *(un)childhood*, presented on two half-screens. The relational video-making methodology was inspired by the concept of ‘relational aesthetics’ described by Nicolas Bourriaud in 1998 and by

new approaches to the subject emerging in the field of relational ethnography. Relational ethnography is a form of inquiry, which emphasises the reflexive dialogical aspects of research relationships (Simon 2013).

Relational video-making combines various filmmaking practices that foster collaboration and dialogue. I was especially inspired by the participatory methodologies of 'shared filmmaking' pioneered by Jean Rouch and those developed by the visual anthropologist David MacDougall in his work with children.

In the written thesis and video-essay, I have demonstrated how the three main types of practices used in relational video-making are shared filmmaking and play, video-recorded conversations, and use of a split screen. Whereas the two first practices correspond to what we undertook in our fieldwork practice, the third was used when editing the video-essay. The use of 'play' and shared filmmaking methodologies resulted from a desire to find engaging ways to collaborate artistically with children without imposing my own artistic practices on them. The second practice refers to use of the video camera as a way to encourage and record video conversations with both children and adults about childhood and parenthood. The last practice corresponds to an editing strategy used in the video: a split-screen dividing the screen into two halves, with two objectives: first, to symbolise a plural relational point of view; second, as a device to convey various temporal dimensions. The video-essay *(un)childhood* was the result of my methodology and it aims to perform the relational voices and times of childhood.

The thesis main contribution to knowledge is a new methodological approach to childhood in time-based art practice that adopts the model of performativity. Over the course of my research I realized how the representational model was inadequate, in time based art practice. As del Rio (2014) writes, the representational model is "unwilling or insufficient to address the way in which the experience of the moving

image can at times escape binary determinations and established signifying codes” (ibid: 2). In her understanding, which corresponds to my own view: “while representation is mimetic, performance is creative and ontogenic” (ibid).

The main conclusions in the written text are twofold. Firstly, how the methodology of relational video-making, enables the video-essay *(un)childhood* to perform the relational voices of childhood. Those voices result from the conjugation of the embodied voices of both the child and the adult. Secondly, how relational video-making also enables the video-essay to perform the relational times of childhood that result from the actions (discourses, conversations, play) established between its participants.

In *(un)childhood* ‘voice’ acts as the embodiment of the subjectivities of both the child and the adult. The literal use of the child and adult’s voice has a political meaning that connects voice to agency. Children and adults perform themselves as powerful beings. Both are capable of critical reasoning and sustain a concrete identity that is embedded in, and in relationship (thus responding) to the one of others. *(un)childhood*’s relational voice performs childhood by clearly breaking with the developmental paradigm, where the artist-parent singular point of view could be seen as allegorizing the powerful “colonizer”.

*(un)childhood* offers as well a novel approach to time to that which is usually used to represent childhood. Through the adoption of the non-chronological structure, the use of the split screen and the inclusion of conversations that self reflexively speak about time, the video-essay clearly combines and relates the present times in childhood to all other temporal dimensions that have traditionally been used to construct childhood. All temporal dimensions are performed as profoundly intertwined in each other. The video-essay breaks with the linear temporality of the diary adopting the one of relational time.

To work with both voice and time in the aforementioned ways, allows the video-essay to perform childhood as a fluid cultural construction in permanent reconstruction that results from the world of both adults and children. *(un)childhood* can thus be said to perform childhood as a “culturally prescribed performance” (Gergen 2009: 75) constructed in co-action by both children and adults.

In addition, my thesis’s original contribution to knowledge is a new methodological approach to the subject, in time-based art practice, which can also be adopted in ethnography or in social science research about childhood.

During the years of my research I became aware how mobile devices with integrated cameras were increasingly a subject of fascination for children. My child was born in 2003 and in 2005 YouTube arrived. That platform soon began encouraging people to broadcast themselves and share individual creations and memories. Children and adults embraced YouTube and other social media platforms enthusiastically.

Within ten years we became part of an Internet landscape in which we are all ‘producers’, ‘using’ and ‘producing’ web content. And some of the most prolific “producers” are young children. They are not just texting, photographing and filming; they are also learning how to edit, using free editing software in computers. They can easily share what they do via social networks on the Internet.

Children are now able to represent themselves without adults’ help and they are doing just that. They are also becoming more technically savvy than adults, at an increasingly younger age. They create their own entertainment, upload video tutorials that share knowledge, or spend their free time watching what other children have done.

I believe that the democratisation of technologies for the production, distribution and consumption of audiovisual content to all (including children) is closing the gap that used to divide children from adults. Current parenting tendencies are also bearing fruit. As we communicate more with our children, we learn from them immensely. We imitate



and inspire each other, as we all live in a more interconnected and common world. That world is highly technological, which is also impacting our own ways of being. In *(un)childhood* it is clear that both I and my child identify and are transformed by our technologies of representation, and also that these are continually changing due to the rapid pace of ongoing progress.

In the essay "*Working at Home*"(2014) by Laura Rascaroli, the author states that digital platforms "constitute a revolution that is having profound and still amply uncharted effects on issues of filmic authorship, self fashioning and self-representation" (ibid: 230). Catherine Russell had addressed the same issue in 1999, indicating that "by inscribing themselves on the level of the 'metadiscourse' film and videomakers also identify with their technologies of representations." (ibid: 277-8)

How the present technologies of representation are transforming our meanings of childhood, and how these can be understood as 'technologies of the self' that contribute to the construction of new conceptualizations of childhood, may be an interesting point to address in future research. Ultimately, I believe that there will always be space for projects where children and adults can work together, and these will always reflect new things as they integrate in themselves the technologies of their respective times.

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## Filmography

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- BRAKHAGE, Stan: *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (USA, 1971, colour, 32 min, 16mm)
- BRAKHAGE, Stan: *Dog Star Man* (USA, 1961-1964, colour, 78 min (total), 16 mm)
- BRAKHAGE, Stan: *Window Water Baby Moving* (USA, 1959, colour, 17 min, 16mm)
- BRAKHAGE, Stan: *Scenes from Under Childhood* (USA, 1967-1970, colour, 16mm):
- Section 1* (1967, 25 min)
  - Section 2* (1969, 40 min)
  - Section 3* (1969, 25 min)
  - Section 4* (1970, 45 min)
- BRAKHAGE, Stan: *The Machine of Eden* (USA, 1970, colour, 14 min, 16mm)
- BRAKHAGE, Stan: *The Weir-Falcon Saga* (USA, 1970, colour, 30 min, 16mm)
- BERGMAN, Ingmar: *Fanny and Alexander* (Sweden, colour, 1982, 340 min)
- BERGMAN, Ingmar: *Persona* (Sweden, b/w, 1966, 85 min)
- BULLOT, Erik: *Le Calcul du sujet* (France, 2000, colour, 10 min, 16mm)
- BULLOT, Erik: *La belle étoile* (France, 2004, colour, 14 min, 16mm)
- BULLOT, Erik: *Oh oh oh!* (France, 2002, colour, 15 min, 16mm)
- BULLOT, Erik: *Tohu Bohu* (France, 2008, colour, 17 min, 16mm)
- CAOUHETTE, J.: *Tarnation* (USA, 2003, colour, 88 min,)
- FRANK, Robert: *Conversations in Vermont* (USA, 1969, b/w, 26 min)
- GEHR, Ernie : *For Daniel* (USA, 1992-1996, 72 min, colour, 16mm)
- GUZZETI, Alfred: *Scenes from Childhood* (USA, 1980, 78 min, colour, 16mm)

LAURO ANTONIO: *Manhã Submersa (Morning undersea)* (Portugal, 1980, 127 min, colour)

LYON, Danny: *Born to Film* (USA, 1982, 33 min)

MACDOUGALL, D: *Doon School Quintet* (2000-2004):

*Doon School Chronicles* (2000)

*With Morning Hearts* (2001)

*Karam in Jaipur* (2001, colour, 54 min)

*The New Boys* (2003, colour, 100 min)

*The Age of Reason* (2004, colour, 87 min)

ROUCH, Jean: *Moi, un Noir* (France, Ivory Coast, 1958, colour, 73 min 16mm)

ROUCH, Jean: *La Pyramide humaine* (France, Ivory Coast, 1959, colour, 88 min, 16mm)

ROUCH, Jean: *Chronique d'un été* (Paris, 1960, b/w, 85 min)

TRUFFAUT, François: *L'Enfant sauvage* (France, b/w, 1970, 85 min)

## **Installation**

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KELLY, Mary: *Post-Partum Document* (UK, 1973-1979)