

**Your History Acts as Your Gravity:  
On Personal History, Passion, and Media Studies**  
by Laurel Westrup

All of a sudden, the Woman in Charlus surfaced: not when he was cruising soldiers and coachmen, but when, at the Verdurins', he asked for a strawberry liqueur – asked, in a shrill voice, for some fraisettes. Would drink be a good head for reading (a head in search of the body's truth)?—Roland Barthes

Any research is a sort of autobiography.—Georges Devereux

To assert that work in media studies, or academic work of any kind for that matter, is a personal activity is hardly controversial or ground-breaking. However, at a time when high theory and “serious” history still seek to write the author out of the equation, a reevaluation of the uses and abuses of “the personal” is perhaps in order. Theory and history, in media studies and otherwise, are no longer considered discreet, thanks in part to scholars in both “fields” and to those interested in tracing the history of theory and the theory of history through historiographical pursuits. Such a blurring of the boundaries has opened up works conceived primarily as historical or theoretical to new perspectives, and has also recuperated previous works by allowing them to be put to new and provocative uses. But what happens when the personal is added into this already tenuous equation? The necessarily incomplete notes which follow are partly a reaction to what I have recently experienced amongst my colleagues as a highly ambivalent attitude toward personal approaches to media scholarship. Insofar as I am arguing for the uncompromising inclusion of personal history in its various forms within academic work, I would like to acknowledge that this piece is as indebted to heated debates with my cohort at the bar as it is to intellectual exchanges in seminar.

I begin with the assumption that in speaking as academics we are always also speaking as friends, fans, siblings, lovers, and so on. Recognizing these multiple subject positions is what I hope to get at through the idea of “personal history.” Following on the work of theorists such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, who argues that history must be conceived of as synchronic rather than diachronic, my conception of personal history has less to do with positing a stable “identity” resulting from a series of events, as it has to do with a sense of the “personal” as a constantly shifting amalgamation of influences, memories, and experiences. To acknowledge this is to acknowledge that inspiration can strike not only at the library or in front of the cinema screen, but also in the corridor of a Los Angeles hotel or in line at the supermarket. The situated-ness of ideas should be seen not as insignificant, but rather as a meaningful jumping off point for the projects that follow from these ideas.

This situated-ness of the academic idea is precisely what Kathleen McHugh takes up in her article, “Women in Traffic: L.A. Autobiography.” In order to explore the “trope” of women in traffic, McHugh draws upon the conjunction of her experiences as a woman who commutes (as a woman literally “in traffic”) and her ongoing engagement with feminist film theory. This approach, in addition to providing a compelling and

personal entrée into a historical and theoretical formulation, also allows McHugh to comment on the efficacy of such a method. She says, “Identity-oriented approaches to film and to representation in general have been both necessary and problematic,” going on to explain that while “necessary as a corrective to an objective, exclusive, elitist critical stance,” such approaches run the risk of failing to challenge the status quo when they “invoke the conventions of bourgeois subjectivity (interiority, authenticity, sentimentality)” (McHugh, 391). By challenging overly broad uses of subjectivity, McHugh is here fighting for a more rigorous notion of the personal. This corollary might be seen as especially important given the historically derogatory gendering of much academic work drawing on the personal.

As Michelle Citron has pointed out in the case of autobiographical filmmaking, the personal is both important and problematic for women. While Citron asserts that, “the autobiographical act is historically significant for women, and all others, who have traditionally lacked either a voice or a public forum for their speaking,” such work has often been dismissed by critics as “confessional” (Citron, 134). The problem this poses, Citron argues, is that “the confessional label dismisses autobiographical film as being inappropriate for public display, at best self-indulgent, at worse narcissistic” (Citron, 134). The same logic is arguably at work in the case of media studies. Foremost amongst works of media scholarship by women that have been praised and condemned as “confessional” is B. Ruby Rich’s collection of writings, *Chick Flicks*. With chapter titles such as, “Prologue. Softball, the Goddess, and Lesbian Film Culture” it is clear that Rich’s approach differs considerably from much of the work in film studies. While it is easy to dismiss Rich’s work as not academically rigorous based on the fact that she includes as much information on her sex life as theorizing about the cinema, her point, and it is an important one, is that these two things are inseparable.

Rich’s book, complete with a photographic section similar to those found in standard (auto)biographies, is as much about her life as it is about the feminist film movement (to the extent that these entities are separate). She begins by demonstrating the necessity of this approach in her mind, and the usefulness it might hold for others when she says:

The aim of this book is both modest and grandiose: to bring history, theory, and experience back into better communication with one another, and to marshal the trio into a synthesis that exposes its process and preserves its parts in as rough-edged, disparate, even contradictory a form as possible... with texts that are more parallel than sequential. In a sense, this form has to do with the particular and peculiar intersections of memory and history and my attempt to integrate the two (Rich, xv).

Believing as she does that the historical and personal “intersection” is of great use, Rich elucidates the impulse toward disclosure which has informed, at least in passing, a large part of feminist work on the media. While Rich integrates her own history and subjectivity into her work more than most, many have acknowledged the impetus, if not the content, of their studies in their own lives. Like Rich, Ien Ang points to the necessity of the personal when she argues in the introduction to her first book that “any study always bears the traces of the subjectivity of the researcher. Doubtless for that reason my

own ambivalent reaction to *Dallas* will also have its repercussions” (Ang, 12). Ang thus begins her study of pleasure and ideology in *Dallas* from her own ambivalent pleasure in watching it.

It is important to note that while such “personal” accounts as Rich’s and Ang’s have sometimes been dismissed as confessional in a derogatorily feminized sense, they have also been inspirational to men as well as women working in media studies. In the introduction to his book on fan culture, Henry Jenkins actually acknowledges that he himself is (gasp!) a fan. Like many scholars opting for the “subjective” approach, Jenkins provides an explicit justification for this method, explaining that, “I have found approaching popular culture as a fan gives me new insights into the media by releasing me from the narrowly circumscribed categories and assumptions of academic criticism and allowing me to play with textual materials” (Jenkins, 5). Here, as elsewhere in personally informed work, the multiple positions of the media scholar are actually seen in terms of value added rather than legitimacy lost.

However, many media scholars remain unconvinced. For this reason, it will be necessary to somewhat complicate standard conceptions of the use of the personal in media scholarship, first by way of escaping the “confessional” model I have just been addressing. This is to say, first, that critics of the confessional need not scrap any semblance of the personal in favor of dispassionate distantiation from their object of study. What the personal adds, on a deeper level, is not necessarily narrative or anecdote, but passion for one’s work. The personal need not be considered solely as a mode of writing, but also as a more or less acknowledged methodology. A scholar can write about his/her favorite film without acknowledging that the film holds this significance. I would ask only that such a scholar allow their passion for the film to come through in their writing, rather than thwarting the enthusiasm that this relationship brings.

It is important to note that the personal approach need not be conceived of as an exercise in self-aggrandizement. Personal scholarship might function as a method of “working through” or as a means of separating oneself from the pain of lived experience. Useful to this formulation is Michel de Certeau’s notion of the historical *other*. Like the psychoanalytical other, the historical other is both frightening and fascinating, attractive and repulsive. Hence, “If, in one respect, the function of history expresses the position of one generation in relation to preceding ones by stating, ‘I can’t be that,’ it always affects the statement of a no less dangerous complement, forcing a society to confess, ‘I am other than what I would wish to be, and I am determined by what I deny’” (De Certeau, 46). By constructing the past as past, the present recognizes its existence, and yet seeks to distance the past by objectifying it. This historical formulation can be applied to personal history as well. By taking up issues or subjects that have been historically important to us, we might separate ourselves from them, turning past pains and pleasures into scholarship which goes out into the academic world as something larger and perhaps more useful than a memory. The personal becomes public domain.

This last use of the personal is arguably at the root of Roland Barthes’ method, especially in works such as *A Lover’s Discourse* and *Roland Barthes*. In introducing *A*

*Lover's Discourse* Barthes sees this highly personal (and at the same time universal) subject—love—as exiled, stating that, “it is completely forsaken by the surrounding languages: ignored, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority (sciences, techniques, arts)” (Barthes, 1). It is in this sense that he, much like the autobiographical feminist filmmakers discussed earlier, seeks to provide an “affirmation” of the personal, in this case through the systematic analysis of the discourse of love. What comes through in *A Lover's Discourse* is Barthes' desire not only to make something *more* of his suffering and ecstasy at the hands of love, but to make something *else* of it. In bringing together memory, emotion, history, analysis, and theory he transforms the “confessional” into a number of concepts useful for, among other disciplines, media studies. Recognizing that the personal plays out not only in its acknowledgement, but also in its disavowal, Barthes suggests that “with my language I can do everything: even and especially *say nothing*” (Barthes, 44). This is an especially provocative notion in relation to a new formulation of personal scholarship which relies not on the personal anecdote, but on an unstated impetus in individual experience.

In considering Barthes' systematization of his own love life, whereby the apple of his eye becomes the impersonal variable “X” and encroaching characters are labeled “Y,” we are brought back to Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of simultaneity. As she has recently argued, interiority and exteriority are always coexistent in the experience of any individual since we always perform our identity, even as we reflect upon it. When Barthes writes about an exchange between X and Y he is being rigorously theoretical insofar as he is analyzing the structure of this exchange and its repercussions, but his analysis comes out of his recollection of the pain he felt as a man succumbing to jealousy. It is Barthes' emotional intensity that powers the theoretical end product which we read as *A Lover's Discourse*. Barthes' project demonstrates that while our work is always to some extent outside of us from the moment it appears on the page (or computer screen), it is bound to our experience not only as scholars, but to our other “identities” as well.

Not long ago I was at the Galaxy Theatre in Santa Ana watching one of my favorite bands play to an enthusiastic audience. Clearly I cannot claim that this outing was altogether scholarly. However, I was not indulging in a guilt-laden night away from my studies, but rather an especially enjoyable research expedition which allowed me to conduct interviews and observations relevant to a project I was working on. The resulting paper was consequently an ode to my musical affinities, but more importantly a fairly rigorous treatment of the intersection between fandom, independent rock, and the commercial issues at play in mainstream television. My ongoing connection to the subject matter provided me with knowledge which would have been difficult for an outside researcher to obtain and also drove me to become more invested in the project. While not all work can or should draw this directly on personal experience, our unique interests and histories should not be relegated to the cutting room floor when we are choosing our scholarly pursuits. By acknowledging the utility of personal experience I am not calling for all media scholars to take up the form of “confessional” personal history espoused by B. Ruby Rich and others (although I believe that such methods can be useful), but to explore the various ways in which personal history can be put to use through object choice, methodology, and writing. By bringing in our personal

experiences, explicitly or subtly, we breathe life into our work. If our history acts as our gravity, then our passion comes through in our prose.

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