

THE NEW AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL QUEST

FOREWORDS

"I lied when I was six years old. As a child, I was often eating outside, at lunch at the school canteen. At 4pm we would be provided with small cakes and a glass of milk. It was my first day of primary school, during break time, before handing her cookies the teacher asked if there are kids allergic to chocolate. From that day on, I started to pretend to be intolerant to chocolate. I didn't realise this story would follow me for a while. I started a lie; there was no turning back. At school, at the day camp, at my friends place the adults would carefully avoid chocolate. I was enduring the consequences; I was deprived of the joy of many cakes, candies, and other desserts for children."

This story is mine; I am the character of this small anecdote I just told you. It is not a story I would easily tell. I can still feel some shame remembering it. Telling it is not an unconscious thing to do. It was only a vague souvenir, without details. It may be the one I choose to open my thesis, perhaps because of its dramatically funny aspect, or maybe because it is really specific to my experience. I had to search into my memories to be able to reconstruct this little story. Into my memories or something else, since the memories might not be anymore, and I am still willing to write this story in a proper way. So I might force it a bit, was I six or maybe seven years old? I know for sure it was my teacher, I still see her face but I didn't really feel the need to describe this. Strangely enough I have to add some details and erase others, to make a coherent story. I could have started by saying "I was around six", and I could have emphasised the fact that I was feeling guilty, instead of focusing on the fact that I was not able to eat chocolate, since I never was very fond of chocolate anyway. I thought that if you tell to someone that a child can't eat chocolate, they would feel pity. So everybody can refer to it. By making a story I become the character of it, with a beginning and an end on the paper. The story becomes accessible to everyone now. I told it for the first time to my boyfriend, he laughed at it, and then I could laugh also.

INTRODUCTION

Autobiographies, meaning self-writing, is a genre of the Modern era that emerged in the 18th century, influenced by the humanists ideas and followed by the romantics of the 19th century. At these times, the self and the individual were considered as the centre of interest. In its tradition, autobiography was a quite narrow genre reserved for bourgeois, well-educated intellectuals. It was reserved for people having the ability to write, read and considered as being of importance for their time. Through history, as education, this genre become accessible to everyone, from every background in the written form but also in the art field.

The autobiographical project implies notions as authenticity, subjectivity, reality and fiction. We will see in this text that these concepts have been profoundly re-evaluated in the mid 20th century, changing the perception of the world and art.

We can see nowadays a revival of the autobiographical practice with artists as Sophie Calle or Maiwenn that I will refer to below. Committing themselves to a life narration, incorporating intimacy, personal stories, they take part in the innovation and the contribution of the development of this practice.

I would like to use the term “autobiography” in its broadest sense. I would like to open it to a genre where art from many disciplines plays with this act of narrating a life story. I would like to reconsider the traditional aspect of this practice, question the perception of this tradition and its relevance. Finally, I will think about the necessity nowadays of artists to embark on the autobiographical project.

NEW FORMS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Philippe Lejeune is a specialist on autobiographies. Through his many essays and publications, he establishes rules and conventions in order to identify and analyse autobiographies using the most classical examples of the genre.

In *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (1975), Lejeune described the concept of the “autobiographical pact”. It defines an implicit agreement between the author and the reader in which autobiographers commit themselves to come to the sincere effort of narrating a life story and in which the reader believes that the author, the narrator and protagonist are one and the same. In this perception, autobiographies were considered as a self-presentation, self-interpretation pretending to be objective and authentic. Autobiographies were seen as the most trustful account of a life of a person.

By defining autobiographies by this pact, Lejeune also reveals the difficulties encountered in this form of writing.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, in his *Les Confessions* (1782) considered in France as the first so-called autobiography, opens his book with the forewords claiming sincerity and authenticity in what he will relate. These forewords are seen as the ultimate autobiographical pact. However, these words show how the autobiographical act is far from being simple and transparent. By being willing to justify himself in its introduction but also through the content of the book, Rousseau doesn't leave the possibility for the reader to doubt. He claims that his work is the first one in its kind and that he will say everything, not hide anything. Rousseau is stating his innocence by giving equal importance to small mistakes and big mistakes he may have committed in his life. In the *Confessions* the rhetoric of sincerity sounds rather strained.

The ideas of Rousseau and humanist philosophers, who believed that the truth was in the heart of each human kind, can be seen as precursor of Modernism. In the first part of the 20th century modernism emerged and art went through a deep reconsideration.

Claiming autonomy from the rules and conventions of classicism, they were rejecting the narrative characteristic of this tradition. One of the main aspects of Modern art was this tendency of artists seeing themselves as the motive for a work, aiming at individual expression and the sincerity of the artist. Claiming that art should carry a truth, artists were busy with finding the right form to represent the world as we perceive it and rejected the rules of representation settled before. Starting with the impressionists, they committed themselves to depict scenes from the everyday life and from everyone in order to get to a true form of expression. They were claiming a visual sincerity, a denial of hiding things that they could see and a decision of painting the world not as they would think it is but as it is in reality. From impressionism until abstract expressionism each artist was claiming a truth that would appear through their individual expression.

In the second half of the century, the perception of the work of an artist became more and more complicated. With the emergence of minimalism and pop art, artists became less focused on the self-expression and rejected the modernist idea considering artists as the centre of a work. When minimalism claimed a transcendental truth to art inspired by the Kantian ideas, pop art

announced the death of any reality and claimed the superficiality of the surface. In that sense, art reached a bigger autonomy, autonomy of any signification that would be else than being art.

In 1968, Roland Barthes essay called *The Death of the Author* (1968) complicates the status of the author in an artwork. It is considered as one of the main poststructuralist text, a theory that argues that instead of self-expression the work of an artist is the expression of surrounding discourses and ideologies through the artist subject. In this essay, Roland Barthes reacts to traditional literary criticism practice and the over controlling author. This reflection rejects the urge to analyse a text through the author and its intention, which reduces the text to one meaning. Barthes claims multiple meanings to a text, desacralizes the author and brings the focus on the reader. The reader is the one that is able to interpret the text in its multiple meanings which depend on his conditions and influences: “a text unity lies not in its origins, but its destination” (Barthes, 1968), its audience.

At that same period the women movement claimed that subjectivity was a male construction “othering” the self and involved various female artist to a critical use of autobiographical practices. Stating that the subjectivity in autobiography was a male construction, they disturbed this traditional representation of the female as the muse, challenging the patriarchal art tradition, using their own intimate and private experiences.

These new ideas caused the loss of the notion of authenticity in works of art.

In the early 90's, the subject and the author came back into practice but with a strong reluctance to narration. The awareness that narration and the artist subjectivity is a construction influenced by both the artist and the viewer restricts the use of the narration and started a reflection on the increasingly blurred line between the virtual and the real. Some artists aimed to come back to and sense the real without expressing it through symbolic representation. For example, using the body as a medium, as a ready-made but also metaphors and images, the artists became the subject and the author as Hal Foster explains in his book called *The Return of the Real* (1996). Next to that, many photographers of the 90's tend to use photography as a way to fix their intimacy, becoming the subject of their work again, as Cindy Sherman or in a more documentary way Richard Billingham and his photo series depicting his family.

In his book *L'Été Dernier. Manifeste Photobiographique* (1983), co-written with Claude Nori, Gilles Mora coined the term “Photobiography” to define photographers who used the medium in a more subjective way than before. In 1999, he tried in an article to set out this term he created, claiming that photography is a problematic tool for autobiographies since it is only a “point of view” and it lacks a narrative aspect to be a reconstruction of the self. Philippe Lejeune (1975) says “the autobiography in which the author is in the confession, sometimes justification and also self seeking, is always a retrospective reconstruction”. The act of reconstruction involves an active implication of the artist perception, which eludes objectivity. Rejections towards artists subjectivity settled by minimalism, pop art, poststructuralist, and feminist art movements restrained, in the mid 20th century, the artist in this act of reconstruction.

We see here a paradox we are confronted with. In one hand, the impossibility for the artist to be trusted and the irrelevance claiming to be sincere and in another hand the necessity stated by Gilles Mora for an autobiography to be narrated.

However, we can notice a tendency of contemporary artists to use narrative again and at the same time being busy with the act of telling the self. It seems that this paradox might not be such a paradox.

Maiwenn, a contemporary filmmaker, has been remarkably dealing with this problematic of reconstruction in her movie *Pardonnez moi* (2006). Still very inspired by her own life *Pardonnez moi* can't be a so-called autobiographical film.

Serge Doubrovsky coined the term "auto fiction" with reference to his novel *Fils* (1977). A fictionalised autobiography, combining two paradoxical contradictory styles: that of autobiography, and fiction. Even though Maiwenn's movie could be compared to this form of writing yet there is a fundamental difference in there. Even though Maiwenn's story is strongly inspired by her life, the story completely disappears in a fictional one and the main character is not the same as the filmmaker anymore, getting away from the autobiographical pact of Philippe Lejeune.

It is interesting to think and analyse why Maiwenn decided to not simply transcribe with as much details and resemblances her story but instead altered it and changed it into a fictional narration.

Pardonnez moi is the story of Violette (played by Maiwenn herself) who decides to make a documentary movie about her family (strongly inspired by Maiwenn's family). Violette and Maiwenn are similar, the family schema, the age, the profession are the same. Already, the story line (making a movie) refers to the act of creation and reflects the position of Maiwenn.

However, to make a parallel, the case of Maiwenn's film fundamentally differs from the one of Violette; they are even antithetic.

This opposition between the project of Maiwenn and the one of Violette is interesting concerning the autobiographical act. Although, both have the same goal (make a film about their family), they choose different ways to do it. When Maiwenn brings the story into fiction, Violette wants to make a documentary by recording every crucial moments of her family. All the characters in *Pardonnez moi* are professional actors; this aspect has its major importance in the act of narrating. Contrary to Violette, by having to (re)create characters Maiwenn had to shape consistent personages, and was obliged to rethink what the kind of parents she had, in a personal and fictional sense (so a general one).

This movie is about reconstructing a life story. For Violette, the end is quite bitter. Violette, by making this film is looking for something impossible to reach. The failure of Violette clearly explains the choice of Maiwenn to bring her story into fiction. Maiwenn considers the act of Violette as problematic. When Violette is just recording moments that she doesn't control, Maiwenn reflects on her situation, on her role as a filmmaker. The film of Maiwenn is not only about her experience; it is also about the complexity of telling a story and the need of doing it. In this movie, the narration mixing intentionally fiction with reality and playing with the artist subjectivity provides to autobiography a possibility for the artist to investigate much deeper the act of telling the self. It brings the work of narration into a reflection about identity and meaning of an artwork, which rethinks the ideas of post modern and feminist movement of the 90's.

Paul John Eakin suggests in his book *How our Lives Becomes Stories* (1999) that "narrative is the sine qua non of identity formation". Eakin is an English scholar specialised in life writing. He cites clinical evidences to suggest that "when the capacity to construct narrative is impaired (...) or never acquired in the first place (...) then identity itself is damaged".

He often refers to Oliver Sacks. Compared to Eakin, Sacks focuses more on how people perform self-narration in their daily life. Oliver Sacks in his book *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (1985) describes the case of Mr Thompson, a man suffering from Korsakoff syndrome who is unable to remember who he is. In reaction to this, he constantly invents his own story confabulating to recreate an identity that he lost. With this example, Sacks explains that everyone has a story life that constructs our identity, and people need to have the ability of self-narration.

Where Thompson is just fantasizing, the contemporary artist Sophie Calle makes it happen. She integrates her imagination and fictional skills in her way of living. She will be a housemaid, a strip tease dancer, she triggers some coincidences, meetings, relations with people. She will also incorporate the narration of the others in her work. In her work *Prenez soin de vous* (2007) Sophie Calle distributes a break-up letter she received to 107 women and asks them to interpret, analyse and perform it. This very personal experience becomes a story for everyone, which all these women could appropriate by narrating it in their own way, and becomes part of their experiences.

Calle shares an unexpected event, an event that she didn't plan but she takes control again to not accept it as it is, by sharing it she transforms the experience into something new. This constant reinvention seems to be the same kind of search as that of Thompson and its confabulations. She constantly re-questions her story life, her self-narration by exploring outside of the frame of what naturally comes to her. She opens the possibilities. However, she also decides what to encounter, she controls the coincidence.

The narrative is a tool for her to experience different and multiple identities, to investigate different possibilities. Since what she experiences is the artwork and the documentation she makes out of it, the idea of reconstruction that artists as Maiwenn dealt with evolved in the idea of construction. Maiwenn reconstructs the past or what she already experienced, Sophie Calle constructs her experiences, controls what she wants to encounter. By doing so, the viewer is constantly in the doubt of the authenticity of what Calle is staging or not. However in both cases, fiction becomes a tool for the search of identity and it appears to be their main motivation. The biographies of the artists are not the primary source of meaning anymore but it is their actions and their narration that is the main point.

This multiple selves and multiple realities are a path for a quest of identity engendered by an identity crises started by the post modern.

IDENTITY CRISES

Jean Lyotard, postmodern philosopher proposes in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), what he called an extreme simplification of the postmodern as "incredulity towards meta narratives" (Lyotard, 1979, Introduction). These meta-narratives are large-scale theories and philosophies of the world such as for instance human history, the Humanism or Modernity. With modernism, the artists had very strong convictions about what was the role they had to have in society. Being part of clearly defined movements through manifests and often being politically engaged, their main motivations were in making statements about what an artist should embody, having utopian ideas about the future and society.

For postmodernist philosophers, there is not such a thing as one and unique reality but there is multiple realities, which function in reference to others.

From that, artists were reacting on works produced before, questioning in a very sceptical and sometimes ironic perspective the modernist ideas of originality in art shown up as a form of idealization. Artists were considering that unique ideas and universal truth were impossible. In that way, the definition of an artist does not exist any more, the identity of the artist is lost into different open interpretations.

Jean Baudrillard coined the term "Hyperreality" as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, 1994,p.1). For him, the world we live in has been replaced by a copy world, radically "unoriginal", defined through symbols and signifiers representing something that actually doesn't exist.

The modernist definition of the artist has been rejected but not redefined yet since post modernism is not a new form of the practice of art, but rather a critical reaction and rejection of the previous conventions and perception of reality.

Postmodern artists were playing ironically with these notions of fictional mixed with real and the power of simulacra that we can notice in the work of Sophie Calle and Maiwenn. However Sophie Calle and Maiwenn attempt to find signification through these multiple meanings in their narrative, their practice seems to depart from only an ironical and sceptical perspective.

Both artists are in an identity quest as the result of the conditions of an unstable identity and meaning of things due to the awareness settled by the post moderns.

Our western society is confronted with an identity crises asking for references all the time.

Reality TV shows, social networking, intimacy and voyeurism has a big impact on our society.

That is how Sophie Calle and many other artists perform narrative as an experimental tool for identity.

The consciousness of the multiple meanings and unstable reality settled by the postmodernist gave to artists like Sophie Calle and Maiwenn a need but also great freedom to experience and explore different identities through their work. The ironical perception has been replaced by dialogue, experimentation, and exploration of constructed realities, making the meaning more complex, thus closer to the real. The biography has not its main importance anymore but it is in the form of narrating and investigating meanings that the works get relevance.

Moreover, it is not because the stories are personal that the reflection is only on a personal matter but it opens to a larger reflection on the act of creation, (re)construction and the artist status of nowadays.

We can see in the work of Feiko Beckers this parallel between the personal and the universal.

His work consists mostly of videos or installation with text. Presenting himself in performances in a minimalist décor, he addresses directly to the viewer theories always engendered from personal anecdotes or stories. These stories are so trivial that we don't really question their authenticity, they could happen to everyone. By using elements of his own life, members of his family he articulates an absurd artificial aesthetic which forces the viewer to take distance from the emotional aspect of the stories. Trying to solve questions that his experiences opens, with a dry methodological discourse he creates a comic surreal character, some sort of alter ego that can construct a metaphysical discourse through insignificant moments. He is looking for logic where we shouldn't. These small unimportant moments engender some existential questions concerning everyone, as subject like trauma, loneliness, love...

As Maiwenn and Sophie Calle, it is not merely the content of his biography that matters the most but the way he presents himself and the meanings he gives to it. Even though he is not reconstructing a multiple meaning narration in opposition to Calle and Maiwenn, the questions he creates and the answers he gives are so absurd that they stay open. It starts a dialogue with the viewer who is as much concerned with the problem as he is.

Feiko Beckers shows that the contemporary practice of autobiography can be strongly impaired with an approach with the audience. It is interesting to see that autobiographies can evolve into a form of art where the audience has its participation. As Roland Barthes stated earlier, artists are now aware that the meaning of art they produce is strongly connected with the viewer's perception, that's one of the reason why it becomes a more multifaceted signification. "The death of the author is the birth of the reader" (Barthes, 1967).

The other is then also a field they investigate. Maiweenn refers to her position in her family, Sophie Calle sometimes involves other people in her work as the work *Prenez soin de vous* and Feiko Beckers embodies an alter-ego as an image for everyone existential quests. Contrary to traditional perception of autobiographies, as Rousseau's case for instance, the autobiographical act is not perceived only as an acknowledgment of the author anymore. Artist through this practice engage larger questions and discussions, it is not merely about self-representation but also it becomes a way for the audience to gain knowledge of himself through the artist narrative.

CONCLUSION

I have been analysing the evolution and development of the autobiographical practice and I have been observing these three contemporary artists Maiweenn, Sophie Calle and Feicko Becker through this text to question this practice and its relevance today.

The perception of reality, the artist and its oeuvre have dramatically shifted due to notions as simulacra and "hyperreal" coined by postmodernity. The author and the viewer became aware of the impossibility to have a macro narrative, meaning one and unique truth. In that way the definition of autobiography and the motivation of auto-biographers had to be readdressed. This consciousness had a strong impact on people's consideration of identity and generated what we could call identity crises. In art, after an era of sceptical attitude and works produced by artists being willing to depict this problematic of a real that is not really, artists felt the urge to take over post moderns and open a dialogue in a more constructive way. . The auto biographer motivations differ from the traditional examples and the definition of the autobiography has to be readdressed.

As a result of this awareness, artists felt the need to refer to themselves again and bring back autobiography as a narrative. Using subjectivity and playing with the tiny borders between fiction and reality, narrative became a tool to unveil and investigate the multiple selves, multiple possibilities. Authenticity became irrelevant, which gave more freedom to the artists but also opened a discourse concerning as much the viewer than the author

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