To my mind, we lack a resonant shorthand to describe the work of Alan Berliner. His five feature-length films have been variously dubbed “documentaries,” “experimental documentaries,” “cine-essays,” “personal non-fiction,” and “autobiographies,” to name just a few. The films and his art installations have been hailed as innovative, even one of a kind. Certainly, Berliner’s artistic signature coupled with a uniquely “personal” take on the themes he explores, makes it easy to recognize an Alan Berliner film. But what is it that distinguishes his films from those of other documentary, experimental documentary, cine-essay, personal non-fiction, and auto-biographical filmmakers working today? To say, for example, that Intimate Stranger is about Berliner’s maternal grandfather and Nobody’s Business about his father, falls as short as saying his films are about identity, memory, and family. Of course they are about all of these — but also far more. The extended conversation I’ve had with the filmmaker on these pages reveals, I believe, that the essence of a Berliner film or installation may not be the subject matter of the work but rather the very process of its making, and what that reveals about the artist himself. A Berliner film is what happens when a quixotic curiosity harnesses an obsessive creative drive and finds a story that the filmmaker must tell. How that story will eventually be conjured depends upon which prism Berliner selects from his magical cinematic toolbox. Just know that it will always be something fresh and unexpected.
In many ways the success of Berliner’s work rests on a commitment to take his dialogue with the viewer as seriously as the one he has with the work itself. He knows that the “personal” story he explores on the screen will succeed only if it can transcend the details of his circumstance and provide viewers with insights into their own. On the occasion of his visit to Colgate University, I had the opportunity to speak with Berliner – who also loves to talk – about what inspires him, the alchemy of his creative process, and how he manages to consistently produce work that makes us giggle and – at the same time – better understand the human dilemma.

Anne S. Lewis

Can you talk about how you come up with the ideas for your films? How do you know when you’ve hit upon the right subject?

Every film I make is a unique equation; a mixture of things I’m curious about combined with layers of psychological and emotional elements that motivate me to begin looking at my life in new and different ways. It often takes me several years to finish my films, so they better be about subjects I enjoy spending lots of time reading, researching, and learning about. But there also has to be something that compels me to embrace the process of filmmaking as a kind of personal journey. To put it simply: a combination of fascination and need. And then there’s an additional “X” factor.
it has to be a subject I can have fun with as a filmmaker. I have to be able to find humor in it, to make fun of myself, to be playful and silly, or intimate and vulnerable. It also has to be a story that challenges me to find its own unique way of being told.

Given the personal subjects of your films, how do you navigate the hazardous shoals of imbuing a personal exploration with universal meaning?

At some point early on, I begin to understand how my subject is at the crossroads of many issues. When I was initially formulating my ideas about Nobody’s Business, for instance, I realized that a film about my father could also be a film about love and family and memory and identity and aging, about the unspoken contracts that bind parents and children, and siblings and cousins, and about world history and family history, and genealogy, and I started to see that this one subject — a biography of this one ordinary man — can be at the crossroads where all these things intersect.
Can you imagine a film that you would want to make that did not involve you or your family?

I ponder that question all the time. I like to think of myself as someone who’s quite engaged with the world, someone who’s always observing and questioning the swirl of things around us. There’s a part of me that would love to make a film about the novelist Philip Roth, or the Israeli/Palestinian struggle, or why it’s taken the automobile industry so long to make electric cars. But when it all comes down to it, I almost always take what I think of as the more difficult path – the one that scares me the most, the one I have the biggest stake in, the one I can’t stop thinking about – the personal.

And with this choice comes the responsibility of creating works that transcend the details of my life by transforming them into resonant universal experience. By using my life as a living laboratory, I want to make viewers reflect upon similar circumstances or issues in theirs.

How did your obsession with personal filmmaking begin?

In many ways it all started with *The Family Album*, which came about after I bought a collection containing more than 40 hours of old 16mm home movies from the 1920’s through the 50’s, from about 75 different families – all anonymous. I edited fragments of those home movies into the arc of a composite lifetime, from birth to death, and then added a soundtrack of many different – again mostly anonymous – family audio recordings. None of my own family home movies are used in the film – just a couple of audio recordings and pieces of an oral history from...
my family here and there, that’s all. And there
I was screening The Family Album around the world,
talking as if I was an expert on the “family.” An
expert on home movies yes; but on the family, no.
And that’s because I had no personal stake in
the film. I was outside looking in, to the deepest
themes my film was trying to explore.

So how did that push you to your next film?
The Family Album not only activated my fascination
with family issues, but also pushed me to look
closer at my own. The next film I made was

Intimate Stranger, a film about my maternal family history told through the
story and the legacy of my grandfather, Joseph Cassuto, who
had died 16 years earlier in the middle of writing his
autobiography.

After Intimate Stranger, I started feeling connected to the
challenges and rewards of personal filmmaking and followed
my instincts towards an encounter with the paternal side of
my family history, seen through the prism of my father Oscar, who thought
it was all nonsense—a project that became Nobody’s Business. Both
films explore the life stories of ordinary, average people in search of
a deeper understanding of identity, personal history, and the role of
memory in family relationships—and a million other things as well.
After finishing *Nobody’s Business*, I decided to focus on something outside of myself, and so *The Sweetest Sound* started out as a rather straightforward film about names and identity, spanning race, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. Perhaps I was trying to make a more traditional "documentary" film. Perhaps I was just being lazy. But the early versions of the film were pretty flat, stuffed with information, and not very cinematic. I had done hundreds of street interviews for the film, so there were sections made up entirely of talking heads. All of which made me realize that I didn’t have to make a film using 10,000 names to investigate the subject of names, but that I could mine a single name and get right to the heart of the matter. And that meant only one thing...
A film about your name.

Exactly. And so I learned what I suppose I already knew. That my name could become a kind of proxy for the way all names function as compressed histories of who we are, where we come from, and what our parents may have been thinking once upon a time. I had to accept that my strength as a filmmaker lies in being willing to take on these difficult journeys of the self and identity.
My next film, **Wide Awake**, was about my life-long struggle with insomnia, told and visualized in the first person. I tried to represent what goes on in my mind when my head hits the pillow, and how my insomnia has impacted my life, my work, and my family. It’s personal filmmaking with a capital “P” and might just be the most personal film I’ll ever make. It certainly was the most difficult and the most risky.

Those familiar with your body of work can’t help but notice a certain self-referentiality. Somehow I suspect intentionality.

I continually recycle images, sounds, and themes, and in some cases reintroduce storytelling strategies throughout my films. It’s as if they’re linked through their DNA. I think of it as “quoting” from one film to another, kind of like references or footnotes in a book.

Because all of my films are so interconnected, it makes sense that certain sounds and images would reappear again and again. But to be honest, I love playing with the plasticity of cinematic storytelling – the way that a single sound or image can morph, and take on different contexts from one film to the next. This not only
creates continuity between all the films, but also generates additional layers of meaning that I can build on with each new film. *Wide Awake* in particular, has images from almost every film I’ve ever made.

So many filmmakers happily delegate the editing process to others. Could you imagine anyone else editing one of your films? That would simply be inconceivable to me, though I admit I’m a bit extreme. The editing table is where all the different “filmmaker” parts of me come together. When I’m editing, I’m also generating ideas about shots I need to shoot, archival images I need to search for, sounds I need to record, words I need to write, books I need to read, questions I need to ask, music I need to listen to, et cetera. I’m not editing so much as inventing my films as I work on them; it’s not something that I can farm out — and frankly, it’s way too much fun to let go of.

How has your editing process changed over the years?

I no longer doubt my initial instincts when I begin to assemble a film. If I’ve conducted an interview for instance, and then start making selections to use in my film, I only need to do that once; I don’t second-guess myself. I’ve also come to believe in the power of bad ideas. I’m not afraid to have them; in fact, I believe they’re essential to the creative process. I also have faith in the very idea of process that I might start somewhere, think I’m headed in a particular direction, make all sorts of wrong turns trying to get there, then realize I’ve been mistaken and begin to rethink and reorient where I’m going and how I might get there.
I’m also someone who loves to refine things. I seem to have unlimited patience for working and reworking something until I get it right. I’m always on the lookout for something loose to tighten, something crooked to straighten, even something good to make better. There’s also a little bit of the frustrated musician in me. All of my films have highly articulated rhythmic dynamics that are inspired by a musical sensibility. Throughout the making of Intimate Stranger, I always thought of the typewriter as a kind of musical instrument. Same with the use of the metronome in Nobody’s Business. Thinking back to the days of making The Family Album, I’ve always approached the flow of words and dialogue in my films as melodies - little micro-rhythms that I can counter-point and layer over music or other sounds. I’m always aware of the entire architecture of my canvas: sound-to-sound, picture-to-picture, and picture to sound. Each film has to look right – and sound right. Again, that’s part of the fun.

That makes me think of your use of the typewriter sounds in Intimate Stranger.

People always ask me where the typewriter idea in Intimate Stranger came from. The answer is that I borrowed it from a short collage film I’d made 10 years earlier called Myth in the Electric Age. There’s a section of that film in which I cut together a bunch of abstract images against the clickety-clack sound of someone plucking away on a manual typewriter. Ten years later I found myself thinking of that same sound-image strategy while staring at thousands of photographs, letters, stamps, and documents left behind by my grandfather. It made total sense to reinvent it in a biographical context as a way of mediating the story of his life – and the sheer volume of elements I had to work with.
How do you account for the stylistic innovations you aim for in films that are also so very personal?  
Although it always makes things more difficult for me, I’m continually trying to re-invent the language and grammar of cinema in my films. I’m always searching for new ways of integrating form and content, and developing a coherent set of metaphors that give authenticity to each film. I’m a firm believer that every unique story has its own unique way of being told.

In *Wide Awake*, you took the viewer on a tour of your legendary studio archive, the wall of color-coded boxes containing files of the sounds and images that figure so heavily in your films. How do you make use of archival images?

One of the first epiphanies I ever had about myself was that I am a natural collagist. I like putting things together. Over the years my collections have kept growing and growing. But isn’t that what collagists do — gather things around them to put together one day?

At some point along the way I made a rather surprising discovery: that an archival image can simultaneously universalize and personalize...
my storytelling. In Wide Awake, for example, there are many shots of people tossing and turning in bed, taken from old public domain industrials, newsreels, and fiction films that are part of my collection. These images allow me to universalize the subject of insomnia by taking myself out of the picture momentarily and allowing the viewer to identify with what these anonymous characters are doing or experiencing. It somehow opens up the film. At the same time those images also reinforce the “personal” dimensions of the film, because each of those people struggling to fall asleep serves as both a surrogate and a stand-in for me – as character and as storyteller. Somehow using these archival characters helps alleviate some of the narcissistic baggage that all personal films have to carry and overcome. Ironically, by deflecting attention away from me, I can dare to be even more personal.

At what point did you realize that?

There are many examples of that phenomenon throughout my work. During the divorce section of Nobody’s Business, there’s a shot of a house falling off a cliff into a river. The scene culminates with my mother saying, “I waited 17 years. I just had to get out of the marriage,” and at that very moment, this suburban house literally collapses and slides into the water.
But inside the film that image functions in many ways: it’s my house, figuratively and metaphorically; it represents life as we used to know it as a family; it’s a symbol of my parents’ relationship, and/but at the same time, it’s also a metaphor for the concept of marriage and the sadness of divorce – both inside and outside of my family. The shot has devastating emotional and psychological power – both personal and universal – simply because of the dramatic content of what is being said over it, none of which has anything to do with houses, rivers, hurricanes or suburbia.

How do your films relate to your installation projects?

In 2002, a year after finishing The Sweetest Sound I was invited to be an artist in residence at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and made a series of interactive works around the subject of names called The Language of Names which also included a text mural on the lobby wall composed of the surnames of everyone living within three miles of the museum. That was the only time I ever conceived of an installation that was directly related to one of my films.
How do the installations fit into your creative life?

I’ve always operated on two parallel tracks: one in which I make films, and the other that creates installations and other sculptural projects. Many of them are interactive, almost all of them involve mediating and transforming large quantities of material and information – especially sounds and images – and every one of them is shaped by a cinematic sensibility linked to the process of “editing.”

These audio installations, video sculptures, and “para-cinema” works have allowed me to go outside the boundaries of filmmaking to explore a wider range of forms, which in turn have generated a broader range of ideas about interactivity, ritual, human nature, and the physical embodiment of sound/image relationships. They also allow me to work with “things” – especially the raw materials of media production – like tape recorders, audio speakers, radios, newspapers, televisions, video projectors, video monitors, and most recently, computers. I’ve always thought that they complement rather than compete with my work as a filmmaker.
Where does the interactive component come in?

I’ve always been interested in creating experiences that make people think, that engage them in the process of making choices, and that allow them to have fun at the same time. I want the gallery visitor to feel like they’re actively participating in the creation of the work. In ways I both do and don’t understand, this way of thinking almost always feeds back into the films.

How so?

Several of my films have interactive components, in which I address the audience directly. For instance, an inter-title in Nobody’s Business invites viewers to “Please contact the filmmaker” if they recognize a face in one of my father’s army photographs. The Sweetest Sound encourages viewers to contact me if they can prove that their surname was changed at Ellis Island, and Wide Awake is filled with interactive gestures, including one in which I edit a montage of images intended to make the audience yawn.

But in a way, the very act of personal filmmaking is interactive. I’m asking the viewer to engage with my film as a mirror to reflect upon his or her own circumstances. Everyone questions the role of family in their lives: everyone struggles with identity; everyone is inspired by — or haunted by — someone’s legacy. I want to take the audience to places they already know very well, but might not venture to on their own.
Your installations haven’t been about personal subjects, have they?

I’ve been commissioned several times to make works exploring my Jewish identity and heritage. In 2000 I was commissioned to make Gathering Stones, an installation inspired by portrait photos of life in pre-war Eastern Europe from the archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. And in 2008, the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco asked me to make a work inspired by the Creation story in Genesis. Playing God used seven computers to operate what I describe as an interactive video slot machine that produces seven-word Haiku-esque phrases from the scrambled text of Genesis. And so, to
answer your question, no, I’ve never done an installation project directly related to me or my family, but it’s something that’s always in the back of my mind.

Wait... just for the record, I did use the sound of my father’s voice in Audiofile, a sound sculpture I made back in 1993. Also the sound of dirt hitting a casket that I recorded at my Uncle Henry’s funeral.
I remember seeing Audiofile during my first visit to your studio. How did you decide what was going to go in each of those drawers? I needed to find 108 sounds that would cut through the low-fidelity playback of a cassette tape recorder. But the real fun part was giving each drawer a label—Open a drawer labeled “No Trespassing” and you hear a dog barking. Open “Light Breeze” and you hear wind chimes. “Nobody Home” is a telephone ringing. Before you hear any sound, the label on the drawer has already set up a playful dynamic between the acts of guessing, anticipation and surprise.

And it was also fun to play, like an instrument. Once you start playing with it, you can create a wide range of sound combinations—from raucous cacophonies to concrete music compositions to the soundtracks of imaginary narratives. At one time Audiofile had a kind of cutting edge feel to it, but now 16 years later, it’s begun to feel like a monument to the cumbersome excessiveness of all things analogue. People have suggested that I make a digital version of it, and it would probably be easy enough to do; but as both concept and an art object there’s something quintessentially pure about touching, seeing and hearing everything right in front of you.
And so what words would you use to describe yourself?

I’ve avoided that question my entire creative life. I’ve been described in many
different ways, but have never actually used any of them to describe myself. I have
a pedigree in avant-garde film but I make films that are embraced by the documen-
tary film world. I make interactive installations that can range from emanations of
Fluxus to investigations of my Jewish heritage. I’m way too obsessive and much too
restless for anyone to easily categorize; I suspect that’ll always be the case.

One of the most satisfying reviews ever written about Wide Awake said, “Another
gloriously eccentric achievement by filmmaker Alan Berliner.” I’m not exactly
sure what that quote means, but it made me feel wonderful. In the end I don’t

Selected Works

Filmmography

WIDE AWAKE (2006) 79 min. color sound
THE SWEETEST SOUND (2001) 60 min. color sound
NOBODY’S BUSINESS (1996) 60 min. color sound
INTIMATE STRANGER (1991) 60 min. color sound
LATE CITY EDITION (1990) Video, 19 min. b/w sound
THE FAMILY ALBUM (1986) 60 min. b/w sound
EVERYWHERE AT ONCE (1985) 10 min. color sound
NATURAL HISTORY (1983) 13 min. color sound
MYTH IN THE ELECTRIC AGE (1981) 15 min. color sound
CITY EDITION (1980) 10 min. b/w sound
LINES OF FORCE (1979) 7 min. color sound
COLOR WHEEL (1977) 20 min. color silent
FOUR CORNER TIME: 4 PARTS (1976-77) b/w silent
LINE 7 min., PERIMETER 11 min.,
TRAFFIC LIGHT 12 min., INTERSECTION 10 min.
PATENT PENDING (1975) 11 min. b/w sound

Para-Cinema, Web Works, Installations

PARATERTETY, WEB WORKS, INSTALLATIONS

EXQUISITE CORPSE (2008)
PLAYING GOD (2008)
13 WAYS OF LOOKING AT SOUND (2003)
www.transom.org
GATHERING STONES (2002) and (2000)
THE LANGUAGE OF NAMES (2002)
THE ART OF WAR (1999)
ELECTRIC GUITAR (1997)
ALL NEWS RADIO (1996)
CRITICAL MASS (1996)
THE RED THREAD (1996)
POSTMARKS (1994)
AUDIOFILE (1993)
AVIARY (1993)
CENTRAL AVENUE (1992)
LATE CITY EDITION (1991)

Made for TV Movie

MADE FOR TV MOVIE (1990)
SEA OF TRANQUILLITY (1990)
TOUCH TYPING (1990)
AUDIOMERA (1989)
AUDIO YARN (1989)
VIDEOTAPE DISPENSER (1989)
SONAR FLASHLIGHT (1989)
NATURAL HISTORY: A PHOTO JOURNAL
(1981) Performance
WORKPRINT (1979)
HOME MOVIE (1979)
BLACK & WHITE TO COLOR (1978)
CITY FILM STRIPS (1978)
SOLID STATE (1978)
SPLICE (1978)
CINE-MATRIX (1977)
think it matters how my work is labeled — by me or by anybody else. But if I had to choose some descriptive words, I’d say that all of my films and installations are highly edited constructions, trying to re-imagine and re-frame our relationships to things we often take for granted. I want all of my work to resonate that way. Lots to think about, fun to interact with, playful but controlled — and/but also unpredictable, inspired, and each authentic in its very own way. And last but not least, labors of love, each and every one of them. Simple as that.

I think I’m going to have to stop you on that thought; it’s getting way past my bedtime.

C’mon Anne, I’m just getting warmed up . . .

It’s time to go to sleep, Alan.