TIME, FAMILY, MEMORY

Storytelling and Innovative Author's Methods
in the Films of Alan Berliner

FERENC MOLDOVÁNYI

Doctoral dissertation · D.L.A.
University of Theater and Film Arts, Budapest—Doctoral School
Supervisor: Dr. habil. Lóránt Stőhr, Associate Professor
2017

English translation

NOTE ON THIS TRANSLATION

The quotations from Alan Berliner were originally spoken and published in English, principally in Scott MacDonald's interview in *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (University of California Press, 2006). Rendering the dissertation's Hungarian versions back into English would have produced a plausible but false Berliner, a voice at one remove from his own. Wherever the original English is preserved in the apparatus of the Hungarian dissertation, the quotation therefore appears here in its original wording, and the notes give the source alone. Where it is not—chiefly passages from the author's conversations with Alan Berliner in New York in February 2016, dialogue that the dissertation quotes from the Hungarian-dubbed version of *Wide Awake*, and a few passages from other sources—the passage is rendered in indirect speech or, for the film dialogue, retranslated from the dub and presented without quotation marks, and the note says so. The filmography and the list of awards and festivals in the appendices reflect the state of Alan Berliner's work when the dissertation was completed, in 2017.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

II Early University Years: Cinematic Antecedents and Influences

III The Early New York Years: The Short Films

IV A Film Made from "Found" Material: *The Family Album*

V Recycled Family Biography: Personal Documentary and Cinematic Invention in *Intimate Stranger*

VI *Nobody's Business*: Anatomy of a "Boxing Match"

VII *Wide Awake*: Fictional Elements in the Personal, Authorial Documentary

VIII Poetry, Time and Memory: A Film about Edwin Honig

AFTERWORD

BIBLIOGRAPHY

APPENDIX 1 Alan Berliner: Filmography

APPENDIX 2 Alan Berliner: Awards and Festivals

FOREWORD

> "There is no filmmaker crafting work like Alan Berliner. He's the remarkable secret hero of the cinema whose name should be on all our lips but isn't."
>
> —Thomas Logoreci[1]



This dissertation, and the research on which it rests, examines the innovative storytelling and inventive authorial methods in the films of Alan Berliner, one of the defining figures of the authorial, experimental strand of contemporary American documentary, in light of the possibilities offered by the formal language of creative documentary. But who is Alan Berliner? Hungarian audiences have seen his award-winning *First Cousin Once Removed* at the Verzió Film Festival, but the rest of his work remains little known here.

Alan Berliner is an American independent filmmaker, director, producer, media artist and editor. He was born in Brooklyn in 1956, grew up in Queens, and now lives in Manhattan. His first successes came with the innovative experimental films and installations he made between 1975 and 1985. From *The Family Album* (1986), assembled from 16mm footage shot by seventy different American families between 1920 and 1950, to the devastatingly beautiful and important *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), he has made a series of outstanding, style-defining works. Of *Intimate Stranger*, the *Washington Post* wrote that the film was brilliant and singular, funny and probing, so original in style and subject as to seem entirely without precedent—intoxicating to watch, a high-wire act performed by a master. *Nobody's Business* (1996), which he shot with his late father, Oscar Berliner, was an enormous international success: it screened at more than eighty film festivals and received numerous significant professional distinctions.

International critics, historians and the documentary profession regard Alan Berliner as the most significant maker of experimental documentary; many consider him the master of the first-person documentary, while others have called him the Woody Allen of nonfiction.

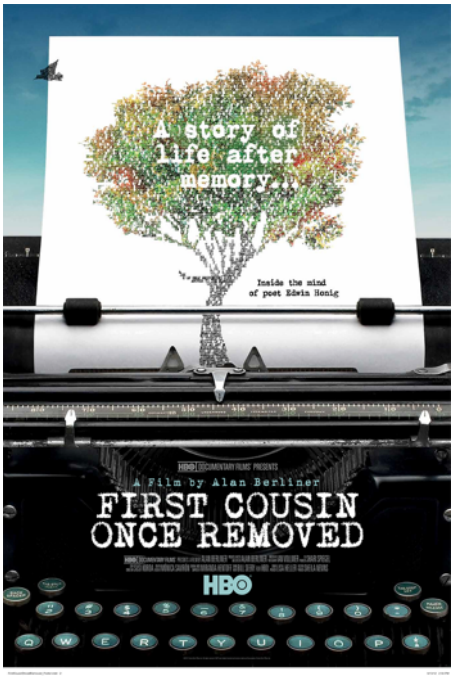
> "America's foremost cinematic essayist."[2]

[1]Thomas Logoreci, catalogue essay for the Freedom of Expression Award, San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, July 29, 2013. Source: alanberliner.com
[2]San Francisco International Film Festival.

> "The modern master of personal documentary filmmaking."[3]

> "Alan Berliner's uncanny ability to combine experimental cinema, artistic purpose, and popular appeal in compelling film essays has made him one of America's most acclaimed independent filmmakers."[4]

In his catalogue essay for the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, Thomas Logoreci wrote that it verges on a crime to describe *First Cousin Once Removed* as merely a personal essay about a relative suffering from Alzheimer's disease; the work is also a dense and complex meditation on life and death, and may well be the finest documentary of its year or of any year. Berliner is able, in precise, staccato bursts, to summon an astonishing universe of association—a grainy black-and-white shot of a house sliding into a river, for instance—and to establish an emotional bridge between his subconscious memory and our own.



Berliner has presented his work at retrospectives around the world, accompanied by masterclasses. His films have become part of university curricula in documentary; his work is held in the collections of museums (among them the Museum of Modern Art in New York), public archives and libraries. The *New York Times* described his films as powerful, compelling and bittersweet, rich in conflict and contradiction, inventive in cinematic technique and unpredictable in structure—and concluded that Alan Berliner shows the power of art to transform life.[5]

[3]Florida Film Festival, 2006.
[4]PBS/POV, *Intimate Stranger*. pbs.org/pov/intimatestranger/bio
[5]Phillip Lopate, "American Family Life Wittily Revealed," *New York Times*, January 12, 1997.



By means of a comprehensive analysis of Alan Berliner's films, this dissertation sets out to examine those means of cinematic expression and those innovative methods that play a decisive role in his storytelling. Through the analysis of the films, the research addresses the central themes, and the questions they raise, that are of decisive importance in Berliner's work (and not only there): time, memory, transience, identity, history, family. "All my films are about memory, identity, personal history, family history," Berliner says.

In 2013, at the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, Alan Berliner received the prestigious *Freedom of Expression* award for his body of work. In his acceptance speech he said that he had felt free to use his own life, and the lives of those he knows and loves—his family—as an elaborate laboratory for exploring where family, family history, personal memory, the shaping of identity, the horizon of mortality and the unspoken power of family legacy meet and play against one another. When he makes a personal film well, he went on, he can carry all of that detail and intimacy into a film that leads its viewers to reflect on their own families, their own memory, identity and mortality, and on the legacies that shape who they are and what they do; and he hoped he did so in ways that challenge and stretch the traditional forms of documentary storytelling, since he believes that the way a story is told should be as interesting as the story itself.[6]

It seems to me worthwhile to explore the secrets of this "elaborate laboratory," to examine how it works and to learn its rules. In it we encounter a range of new approaches and formal solutions not yet present in the toolkit of Central and Eastern European, and Hungarian, documentary practice. The forms of storytelling have always been an unavoidable challenge for filmmakers of every era and genre; it is very likely one of the fundamental questions of filmmaking itself. The value of this research lies, among other things, in drawing the attention of filmmakers and film students, through the analysis of these authorial procedures, to further methods and tools; and in enriching, through new perspectives and new solutions in film language, what might be called Hungarian "documentary literacy," broadening the repertoire available to the nonfiction profession.

[6]Alan Berliner, acceptance speech, Freedom of Expression Award, San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, Castro Theatre, July 29, 2013. The dissertation quotes the speech in Hungarian; it is summarized here in indirect speech. The full English text is published at alanberliner.com.

II

EARLY UNIVERSITY YEARS: CINEMATIC ANTECEDENTS AND INFLUENCES

Alan Berliner was born in Brooklyn on October 11, 1956. His father, Oscar Berliner, the child of Ashkenazi immigrants from Europe, was born in the United States. His mother, Regina Cassuto Berliner, was a first-generation immigrant: born in Alexandria, the daughter of a prosperous Sephardic merchant, she did not cross the Atlantic until the end of the Second World War.

Since several important works in Alan's[7] directorial career are closely bound up with his family's history, these matters will be discussed in greater detail in connection with the individual films. Among his works, *Nobody's Business* explores the paternal line in depth, while the maternal side of the family lore is the subject of *Intimate Stranger*.

In this chapter I focus on the years and events that played a formative role in shaping Alan's directorial style and cinematic vocabulary, and that are organically connected to it or influenced it.

Alan was sixteen when he enrolled in the Cinema Department of the State University of New York at Binghamton, where he studied from 1973 to 1977.

He arrived at Binghamton after high school and his parents' divorce, determined to make a fresh start:

> "I had just come from a very difficult high school experience, not to mention a very painful experience at home, culminating in my parents' very ugly divorce. I remember during the summer just prior to entering college, sitting alone for hours in the middle of a stretch of rapids on the Delaware River, making a kind of pact with myself, thinking, "It's time to refocus now. Time to stop getting high all the time. Time to get serious. For many reasons—both good and bad—I was primed for a transformative experience. Between the urgency of my deep psychological unrest and the intensity of my restless creative energies, finding the cinema department at that moment in my life was pure synchronicity."[8]

[7]I have known Alan Berliner personally for close to twenty years; the reader will permit me to refer to him throughout simply as Alan.

[8]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.



During this period the Binghamton Cinema Department was an extraordinarily open, exciting and vibrant place, full of energy and dynamism. Internationally recognized experimental filmmakers came there as visiting artists and took part in the program—the Austrian Peter Kubelka, the German Heinz Emigholz, the Swiss Alfons Schilling. The principal artist-teachers included the video and computer artist Ralph Hocking, founder of the Experimental Television Center[9]; and Saul Levine and Dan Barnett.[10]



The Binghamton film department became legendary: from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, a great many filmmakers and media artists who later rose to prominence studied and worked there.[11] In 1971, Larry Gottheim and Ken Jacobs invited Nicholas Ray to the department to teach directing. Ray was convinced that directing can only be taught in practice, and accordingly he set about making a film together with the students. The greatest challenge of this period was the making of an experimental film that focused on Nicholas Ray as a teacher of cinema and on his students, who, inspired by their mentor, were constructing small stories of their own.



In the making of *We Can't Go Home Again*[12] everyone played themselves, and each took on several roles in the crew at once. The film had six cinematographers and seven editors, several of whom also appeared on screen. Tom Farrell, for instance—who would later appear as an actor in several films, including films by Wim Wenders—worked here as writer, performer and editor alike.

[9]The Experimental Television Center was founded in 1971 by Ralph Hocking to encourage and support work made with the new electronic media, and to foster young experimental media artists. Alan Berliner is among its more than one hundred artists. experimentaltvcenter.org/artists

[10]Saul Levine and Dan Barnett are both significant avant-garde and experimental filmmakers. Levine binds his filmmaking to a form of political activism. Barnett works in film theory as well as production, and is the author of *Movement as Meaning: In Experimental Film* (Rodopi, 2008).

[11]Scott MacDonald has written a comprehensive account of this period, giving voice to the students of the time: S. MacDonald, *Binghamton Babylon: Voices from the Cinema Department, 1967–1977* (State University of New York Press, 2015).

[12]*We Can't Go Home Again* (dir. Nicholas Ray, 1973).



"We lived at night, shooting and editing the greatest experiences of our lives, in a lonely place, on marshy ground."

—Tom Farrell[13]

Also remarkable was Ray's technique of using many parallel images simultaneously while integrating, and indeed foregrounding, the work of several of his students. The film was completed in 1973 and was selected for the Cannes Film Festival that same year. The restored version was shown at the Venice and New York film festivals in 2011.



Although Ken Jacobs also had a significant influence on Alan, personal affinity drew him closer to Larry Gottheim:

"I remember thinking to myself how Larry's extraordinary attention to subtlety and detail, combined with his incredible obsessive energy, was something I could totally relate to. Something I aspired to. I always felt that I was a perfect audience for Larry's films, and I loved talking about them with him. In many ways, Larry taught me how to look at images. How to savor details and nuances. How the ways in which we describe and notate images while we work with them play a critical role in what we end up doing with them."[14]

The Binghamton years were in all likelihood an important point of departure for Alan's creative, poetic and at times metaphorical use of the image, even if the road to a visual language wholly his own would prove a longer one. At the same time, his artistic practice always included an impulse toward self-expression beyond film itself, realized in installations and in what he called paracinematic works—works employing the methods of paracinema. Here, too, the first steps were taken with Larry's help:

"Larry also introduced me to the idea of "paracinema," and I was part of a small group of students who presented a performance at the Collective for Living Cinema in 1976, called The Perils of Space. The idea that you could work with cinematic ideas and concepts without actually making films was something that excited me, and in many ways helped inspire the installation work I continue to produce to this day. I think I owe that to Larry. Eventually Larry and I also made the transition from mentor and student—and I say this with all humility—to friends and colleagues. Over the years we shared intimacies about our personal lives, as well as the struggles we were experiencing with our work. Larry and I had a special relationship. I even babysat for his children."[15]

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[13]Gabe Klinger, "We Can't Go Home Again: Nicholas Ray's Film Maudit Restored," *Cinema Scope*, 2011.

[14]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.

[15]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.

By his final year, at the age of twenty, Alan was already a teaching assistant to Larry Gottheim and Ken Jacobs. When Jacobs fell ill and could not begin teaching at the start of the semester, the department, rather than bringing in an outside instructor, asked Alan to take over Jacobs's film production classes, and even paid him to do so. Alan was deeply involved in university life in other ways too: he was president of the local film society and worked as a work-study student, as a projectionist in departmental classes and in the camera and editing equipment office, his wages credited against his tuition. All the while he was working feverishly on his film projects and on paracinema-inspired collages, sculptures, photographs and other works. The department was remarkably supportive: recognizing his diligence and talent, it even allowed him to convert a basement classroom into a gallery of his own, where he mounted a solo exhibition of his paracinematic works, some of which also formed his senior thesis project.



For the young students and artists drawn to avant-garde and experimental film, a legendary artist-run cinema, and the intellectual and production workshop that formed around it, played a vital role: the Collective for Living Cinema, founded in 1973 on White Street in Tribeca by former Binghamton film students.

In opposition to mainstream film production, the progressive film departments of a handful of universities[16] and workshops founded on similar independent initiatives became the bastions of alternative film culture.

Alan recalls:

> "The founders of the Collective for Living Cinema had been graduates of the cinema department, and there was always a deep spirit of connection and continuity. The idea of making films worthy of showing at the Collective was a motivation for many students. It certainly was an important goal for me personally. Knowing the Collective was there gave a tangible "real-world" dimension to the highly aestheticized environment we were immersed in at Binghamton. Not only that, but it was also a compelling reason to move to New York City after graduation. In many ways, with all due respect to Anthology Film Archives and Millennium, the Collective was the center of the avant-garde film universe in New York—at least in the late seventies and early eighties."[17]

[16]Stan Brakhage, the legendary figure of American experimental film, taught at the University of Colorado at Boulder from 1981 until shortly before his death in 2003. The Stan Brakhage Institute was established there in 2005.

[17]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.



During the Binghamton years Alan made a four-part experimental work, *Four Corner Time*, along with two further shorts, *Patent Pending* and *Color Wheel.*

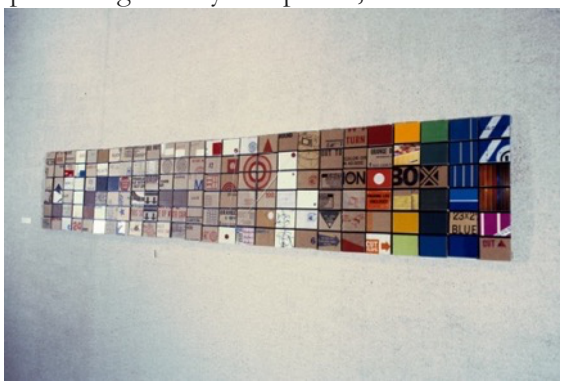
He graduated with distinction from the Cinema Department of the State University of New York at Binghamton in 1977.

In Alan's final year, Carmen Vigil, then programmer of the San Francisco Cinematheque, came to Binghamton at the department's invitation with a selection of avant-garde and experimental films made on the West Coast, chiefly in the San Francisco Bay Area. Alan was asked to pick him up at the bus station and show him around town before the screening. During their walk Vigil mentioned that on his way home he would make a detour to Norman, Oklahoma, to meet the avant-garde filmmaker John Knecht. It was essentially Vigil who drew Alan's attention to Knecht, who was then setting up an innovative graduate program in film and video production at the University of Oklahoma.



Alan eventually received an excellent offer from the University of Oklahoma's School of Art: a full tuition waiver for the duration of the master's program, a fellowship with a stipend, and the opportunity to teach filmmaking alongside his studies. He was also given his own studio and departmental office. During those two years, however, he made no films.[18]

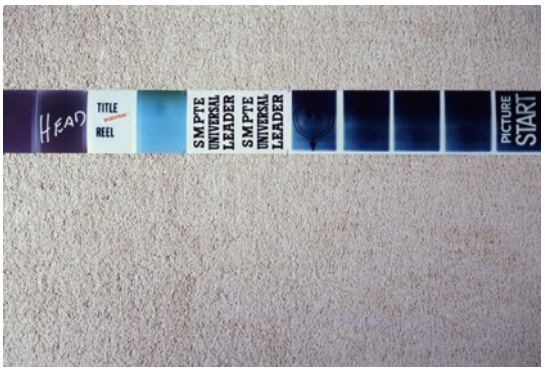
In Oklahoma he continued the paracinema-inspired work he had begun at Binghamton, producing mainly sculptures, video installations, time-based photographic collages and paper films. One of the most important Oklahoma works, exhibited on the walls of the Collective for Living Cinema in December 1977, was *Cine-Matrix*:



"Cine-Matrix is a cinematically inspired wall-mounted grid of 156 three-inch by four-inch rectangles [twenty-six across by six down]—I thought of them as

[18]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.—Berliner recalls that the Oklahoma department, too, was generous and understanding toward him. Although he was introduced as a filmmaker, and taught film with all his heart and passion, he made not a single film in his two years there; he continued instead the paracinema-inspired work begun at Binghamton—chiefly sculptures, video installations, time-based photo collages and paper films—and also studied some music theory. Most of his graduate students were painters, sculptors and photographers, and he was drawn to their materials and tools, their debates and conversations. Yet he never thought of himself as anything other than a filmmaker, and looking back he believes that not making films in Oklahoma made him a better filmmaker. The dissertation quotes this passage in Hungarian; it is rendered here in indirect speech.

> frames—cut out from found corrugated cardboard boxes. I went around to every dumpster in town looking for interesting pieces of cardboard containing words, colors, textures, graphic elements, random markings, photographic images, you name it—an entire language unto itself—and ended up cutting out close to five thousand small rectangles. I think of Cine-Matrix as my first successful translation of cinematic logic—in particular, a lot of my ideas about editing—into two-dimensional form."[19]



In his thesis project, entitled *Workprint*, he spliced seventy-five one-foot photographs into a single reel, which he called a paper film.

Alan recalls the Oklahoma years:

> "When I was first contemplating whether to accept the Oklahoma fellowship offer, I remember Larry Gottheim telling me, "In the arts, it doesn't matter where you go; it's what you do." The next thing I know, I'm living in Norman, Oklahoma."[20]

Alan had started at Binghamton very young, and he was only twenty-two when he completed his master's degree in Oklahoma. Afterward he hoped to find a teaching position; he wanted to teach filmmaking.

> "I loved teaching. At the time, there were only three avant-garde-related job openings in the country, and I applied for each of them. The only problem was that I didn't send out any films with my application; I sent slides of the paracinematic work I'd been making in Oklahoma. In the end, no one was willing to take that kind of a chance on me, and in retrospect, I guess I don't blame them."[21]

[19]alanberliner.com

[20]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.

[21]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.

III

THE EARLY NEW YORK YEARS: THE SHORT FILMS

After completing his master's degree, Alan returned to New York in 1979 and began looking for work. Through a friend he was introduced to the editor Emma Morris, whom he asked for advice and help in finding a job. Editing was not at all the direction he wanted to take: he wanted to shoot film; it was image-making that interested him. Emma Morris gave him a list of possible openings, and by pure chance Alan landed a job at ABC Sports, on the program *The American Sportsman*, as a sound-effects archivist and librarian. He had not shot a film in two years and had no idea of professional protocols or workflows. "I didn't know the jargon, the code words, how to talk to people in a real cutting room. To be honest, I applied for an assistant editor's job without even knowing what an assistant editor does," Alan recalls.

For the first nine months his work consisted of sitting in a room with headphones on, listening to sound effects and ambiences. Each effect had to be carefully processed, labeled and annotated, so that productions could later find their way through the sound library with ease.

> "It was an incredible education in close listening and the ability to recognize nuances of difference between sounds that were often only slightly dissimilar, not to mention the ways that sound—and especially the layering of sound—can change the way we look at images. It was the perfect job for me. And, best of all, many of those sounds eventually became part of my own personal sound library."[22]

After those nine months he moved into sound editing. In all he worked at ABC for some six years as a contract sound editor, but never worked more than six or seven months a year, so that he could devote himself to his own projects and films.

> "In the professional film-editing world, everyone aspires to be a picture editor, but my instinct at the time was to stay away from the lure of picture editing and earn money exclusively as a sound editor. Sound editing allowed me to work quietly and at my own pace; no head trips, no mind games, no office politics—just give me your film when you're done with it, and let me create an interesting sound track for you. My basic strategy was to work extremely hard—by that I mean many late nights and weekends—for a few months at a time, so that I could make enough money to take five or six months off and concentrate on my own work. I always suspected that some people at ABC thought there must have been something wrong with me, because I was never interested in climbing the career ladder. But I was only protecting my relationship to my work. And my sanity."[23]

[22]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.
[23]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.

During this period he also brought his creative sound editing to an exceptionally high level of precision. He received six Emmy nominations and won the award three times. For nearly eight years Alan taught a directing class at the Collective for Living Cinema and editing at the Millennium Film Workshop, while continuing his own creative work.

The short films of these years—*City Edition*, *Myth in the Electric Age*, *Natural History*, *Everywhere at Once*—marked both a step beyond the experimental films of his university years and a period of artistic apprenticeship. In making them he developed the working methods needed for a creative process built on large quantities of archival sound and image. Through these collage and montage films he perfected his editing technique and arrived at the associative, multivalent, metaphorical mode of visual expression that would remain central to the later films and became a distinctive signature of Alan Berliner's mature work. His years as a sound editor, and the sound-editing techniques he tried out in the shorts, laid crucial groundwork for the creatively constructed sonic world of the later films, itself a decisive element of Alan's cinema and an organic part of his storytelling. At the same time, these shorts offered an escape from the daily routine dictated by the need to earn a living and a return to his own artistic world, and they allowed him to sustain his connection with that world. They also served as a source of images and sounds for the later films, while their motifs and associations could equally be the first sketches of a theme or problem to be developed later.



A striking example is a scene from *City Edition*, made in 1980, on which Alan reflects:

> "For example, there's a shot in City Edition of an anonymous family of four sitting at a kitchen table. It's part of a montage that begins with a short city symphony made up mostly of archival Depression footage, followed by a series of shots that transform into a kind of surreal dream sequence—some scat dancing, a dolphin jumping out of the water, Edison in his laboratory mixing chemicals, a home-movie image of a small boy with a camera, and then this archival shot of the family I'm talking about—father at the head of the table, mother pouring tea, a young boy, and his younger sister. I had thousands of images to choose from for that montage, any one of which would have confirmed the surrealistic sense of shock and dreamlike discontinuity. So why did I use that image of the family? My best answer is that back in 1980 when I made the film, I wasn't psychologically ready, wasn't emotionally mature enough, wasn't confident enough as a filmmaker, to confront the demons of my childhood. Using a surrogate, almost "neutral" image of the family at that stage of my life was a kind of premonition. Without realizing it, I was planting a seed inside my psyche, telling myself—reminding myself—that I had a lot of personal family issues to deal with, and that I would, or could, or should, mediate them in a film one day. Sixteen years later, Nobody's Business is the fruit of that seed."[24]

[24]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.

In this short film we may also note another important motif, one that remains significant in Alan's life to this day: the *New York Times*, whose issues he has been collecting for decades. In the opening images of *City Edition*, the uncut, continuous pages of a fresh issue of the *Times* run vertically through the frame on a printing press. A moment later the finished copies are traveling along a conveyor belt; then someone buys a copy of the new edition at a newsstand. As the camera moves in on the front page of the newspaper in the man's hand, it sets in motion a black-and-white stream of associative images in which archival documentary, newsreel and fiction footage appear side by side. The use of *New York Times* photographs in the creative process, and as potential raw material for a film, appears in Alan's practice as early as the beginning of the 1980s:



> "Starting January 1, 1981, I gave myself the task of cutting out every single photograph that appeared in the New York Times every day for the entire year. Something between a free-form obsession and a daily meditation, it was also an exercise that helped keep me grounded in the process of art-making. By year's end, I had amassed more than ten thousand photographs! I also cut out the daily "quote of the day," and every week I cut out the question and answer section from Tuesday's "Science Times." Above and beyond all of that, I was also cutting out news articles that interested me each day."[25]

This is worth noting, because the *New York Times* photographs gathered over the decades are now the raw material of Alan's most recent, ongoing project. We can see, then, that in these shorts of the 1980s and the artistic gestures surrounding them, a number of motifs, materials, themes and kinds of knowledge accumulated that would come to fruition, and find their true artistic form, in the later work. Alan regards these shorts essentially as collage films made from archival material. Of their place in his body of work he said in an interview:

> "Looking back now, I'd prefer to see those short films the way one might look at the early work of a musician—that is, as etudes or studies, pieces in which I was perfecting my chops, where I was working through my relationship to montage, to bricolage, and, more important, discovering my own filmmaking process—my way of working with found and archival images and sounds, with voluminous quantities of them; and of stretching the capacity and flexibility of my associative memory, all of which would serve me well as I moved forward into my next phase of work."[26]

[25]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.
[26]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.

IV

A FILM MADE FROM "FOUND" MATERIAL: THE FAMILY ALBUM

BEFORE THE FILM: SERENDIPITY

One evening in June 1981, Alan arrived at the Collective for Living Cinema to teach his filmmaking class, and noticed a flyer on the bulletin board: *home movies for sale*. It advertised some eighteen hours of footage shot on 16mm stock, spanning roughly three decades from the 1920s to the 1960s, and even included a detailed inventory of its contents: weddings, birthday parties, the beach, pets, travel diaries and so on. Alan wrote down the telephone number at once, and the next day it turned out that, luckily, he had been the first to respond. He soon met the seller on the corner of 48th Street and Sixth Avenue in Manhattan and, for a few hundred dollars, bought this enormous quantity of 16mm home movies: two crates of it. Working through material of such volume, range and richness took a very long time.

The first phase was viewing: he went through the entire mass of footage, took notes and made a preliminary selection. Since most of the material had been shot on black-and-white 16mm reversal stock, laboratory work was needed before editing could begin: a black-and-white negative had to be struck from the positive, which slowed the process considerably. The work was done at the laboratory of John E. Allan, which specialized in archival footage and was regarded as the finest in the United States; Allan also ran an enormous film archive.[27] The reversal originals were printed to negative by wet-gate (immersion) printing.[28] Lab work on the selected scenes often took months; footage sent out in June might not come back until September.

The purchase also included beautiful Kodachrome home movies, mostly from the 1950s, but for largely aesthetic reasons Alan decided to use only material made between the 1920s and the 1940s.

Alan also widened his search in the hope of finding more material, advertising wherever he could that he was looking for 16mm home movies. In the process he learned of more and more sources: archives and family collections in Connecticut, Vermont, New Jersey and remote parts of New York State. He also visited Alan Kattelle[29] in Hudson, Massachusetts, who generously allowed him to use footage from his own remarkable home-movie

[27]John E. Allan's film archive holds close to twenty-five million feet of 16mm and 35mm material shot between 1896 and 1980. allenarchive.com

[28]Wet gate, immersion printing. Archival film is frequently scratched, and the removal of scratches is an old problem, nearly as old as photography itself. The oldest solution is the immersion method: a liquid of the same refractive index as the film base or gelatin—glycerine, for example—is applied to the scratched film, which is then placed between two glass plates in the printer. The liquid fills the damage in the base, so that no refraction occurs when the film is backlit and the scratch becomes invisible. The wet gates used in film printing and transfer follow the same principle. Experience has shown wet-gate printing to be necessary for archival material, since only this can remove shallow surface scratches. (Author's note.)

[29]Alan D. Kattelle is the leading American authority on the history of the home movie, and the author of *Home Movies: A History of the American Industry, 1897–1979*. (Author's note.)

collection. The film's imagery was finally built from home movies gathered from more than seventy-five families, spanning the 1920s to the 1940s.

While he was studying the home-movie footage, the next step was to build the film's sound world and to find, gather and process the recordings it would require, itself a very time-consuming process. As he worked through the images, he felt a natural need to build the soundtrack, too, from found and collected material; at least half of it he eventually bought at garage sales and flea markets.

> "So I started to collect, and I asked people to give me tape recordings of birthday parties, and tape recording of weddings, and tape recordings of family gatherings and tape recordings of holidays and audio letters and music lessons and nowadays even, I was able to stretch it to telephone answering machines. Any sort of informal, authentic family audio recording. And uh, I started to be inundated with those sort of documents as well. And so I started to collect and amass this vast, vast archive of home movie imagery and family recordings. I might add also, that I was given a whole range of oral history recordings by friends and associates." [30]

> "I actually give in the credits, you'll notice I give a credit to Serendipity, that's not a company, nor is that a person. I just felt that this energy that is Serendipity was very, very good to me and I felt that it was my way of gesturing back to give it a credit in the film, and that's why its there. It became a big formative friend throughout the process of making the film." [31]

Work on *The Family Album* lasted more than five years, from 1981 to 1986. The film was edited on traditional analog equipment, a 16mm Steenbeck. In working through the imagery it became apparent, among other things, that most home movies had been shot in summer, so that summer exteriors, such as beach footage, were disproportionately abundant. Comparatively little footage was shot in the fall, and some sixty to seventy percent of home movies featured children, so cheerful, joyful and festive scenes predominated. Hardly anyone wanted to film a sad, or even a less than happy, occasion, and the available material contained no footage of funerals at all. The imagery of these home movies thus reflected a beautified, idealized reality.



The great challenge of the film, therefore, was to give this beautiful period footage a structure and a context of meaning that would reach beyond the particular and speak, metaphorically and poetically, in many layers and at times with gentle irony, about family, everyday life, struggle and the fundamental questions of human existence. Alan wrote about this in an article for *DOX Magazine* in the fall of 1994:

[30] PBS/POV, *Behind the Lens with Alan Berliner*. Interview with Marc Weiss for the POV broadcast of *The Family Album*, 1989.
[31] PBS/POV, *Behind the Lens with Alan Berliner*. Interview with Marc Weiss for the POV broadcast of *The Family Album*, 1989.

> "I began to create juxtapositions of these images with various family audio recordings, including accounts of birthday parties, weddings, funerals, audio letters and oral histories. For instance, I combined a woman's voice saying, 'I always looked like I was happy to the public, but it just was never like that in the home,' over an image of a man and woman smiling and joking for the camera. Contradictory juxtapositions like this call into question the ways in which supposedly joyous images created for posterity reflect people's real inner lives and emotions. The Family Album is built entirely of voice-over sound to image 'discoveries,' each exploring a different aspect of the complicated universality of family life and its rituals. The 60-minute film is structured from birth to death, and weaves its elements into a composite lifetime: the celebrations and struggles along the path from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience." [32]



FROM THE PARTICULAR TO THE UNIVERSAL

The great strength of the film is the filmic time created by the editing, which lifts particular time into a universal human time running from birth to death, while preserving throughout the multiplicity of meaning in the individual events of a human life, and the range of possible readings they contain, from the poetic to the humorous. The individual scenes are interpreted, counterpointed or completed by dialogue and sound of extraordinarily varied quality, provenance and period, sound independent of the image it accompanies. This method goes beyond the bounds of factual documentary structure and, in the spirit of artistic freedom, leads us into a fictive and at times dreamlike world in which, thanks to the virtuoso editing, the images take on new meanings, or appear in new relationships, with startling ease and naturalness. At the same time the images bear the defining marks of the period in which they were made, and this particular record of three decades of American life is a treasure trove for cultural and visual anthropology, and for sociology as well:

> "In making the film I mean I came upon, I did virtually a content analysis of home analysis. I mean I saw so many that one could easily… easily describe the tendencies, easily describe what sort of, is going on here." [33]

Alan used no footage from his own extensive home-movie archive in the film, but excerpts from older sound recordings, and from conversations with family members recorded while the film was being made, appear in it several times, a matter to which we will return.

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[32] Alan Berliner, "Patience and Passion," *DOX—Documentary Magazine*, Autumn 1994, no. 3.
[33] PBS/POV, *Behind the Lens with Alan Berliner*. Interview with Marc Weiss for the POV broadcast of *The Family Album*, 1989.

> "And I remember watching my own home movies as a child, and by the way, my own home movies are not in the film. My own home movies were recorded in 8mm film and I restricted the film specifically to 16mm home movies. If I had opened the film to 8mm I would have been absolutely deluged, so I kept it, as one of the parameters that they could only by 16mm, and indeed the quality of the 16mm image that I had for the most part was excellent so I kept it at that format." [34]

The film's exposition opens with a microphone test, a count laid over film leader, after which we hear an elderly woman's recorded message, which serves as a kind of motto for the storytelling at the thematic, tonal, stylistic and aesthetic levels alike. From the very first minute it is clear that the spoken words bear no direct, organic relation to the images on screen (we should not expect much synchronous sound), and yet a creative, exciting and unusual relationship is established, indirectly, between the dialogue and the archival moving images. Here Alan in effect sets out, or anticipates, the rules of the film's game.

Alan builds the film on a seemingly very simple structural principle: the events evoked by the diverse archival material correspond broadly to the stages of a human life, moving from birth through adulthood toward death. The kind of artistic freedom in which each scene rests on extraordinarily rich and complex elements and allusions, within the particular gap between sound and image, is perhaps best served by a simple yet metaphorical structure with relatively broad parameters:

> "In its simplest terms, the structure of the film is… evolves from birth to death. The film opens up with babies and sort of ends with gray and white-haired people. The film becomes old, the film ages, the film matures, the film loses its innocence as it grows into experience. And of course, structuring it the way I did allowed, allowed for, allowed for a wide latitude of play, allowed for a wide latitude of moving in and around this sort of linear, at least linearly described structure, linear described chronology." [35]

The opening images are followed by images of childhood: an infant during a lullaby, a nursery with close-ups of a newborn and soft toys, then intimate images of a mother waltzing with her baby to the sound of a barrel organ. There is astonishing footage of proud, happy parents lifting and tossing their babies in the air, of a baby crawling forward to the descending notes of a piano exercise, of toddlers learning to walk in the street and in the garden. Meanwhile we hear babbling, children's songs, the defiant "no"s of the toddler years, and again the slightly out-of-tune sound of the family piano.

Through the settings of childhood, the middle-class interiors of the period come into view: rooms, objects, gardens; children's parties, birthdays, Christmas evenings and the intimate moments of family life. Small boys play tag and wrestle, children ride seesaws, swings and merry-go-rounds in playgrounds; we see the seaside and moments of childhood friendship. Meanwhile, on the soundtrack, memories of childhood are evoked, from a conversation in the street about whether God exists to fragments of stories that bring these family images to new life.

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[34]PBS/POV, *Behind the Lens with Alan Berliner*. Interview with Marc Weiss for the POV broadcast of *The Family Album*, 1989.
[35]PBS/POV, *Behind the Lens with Alan Berliner*. Interview with Marc Weiss for the POV broadcast of *The Family Album*, 1989.

All the while we move forward in time: school years, more Christmases, summer camp, baseball, sporting events, scout parades and peace marches. Thanks to the virtuoso editing, the sequences built from this remarkably rich imagery connect with and reflect on one another in many ways.

> "I worked with what was there. It just so happened that what was there covers a pretty broad spectrum as it is. I make no pretense that life is like that. It's an illusion, home movies I've stated, they are illusory projections of reality intended for a glossed over retrospective sense of a joyous past. They're lies. And basically it's through the soundtrack that I point that up. Because what the soundtrack does to the film is that it adds and lends varying degrees of irony to the image. The soundtrack very often undercuts the image; it contradicts it, it counterpoints it. It adds if you will, counter poignancy. It offers resistance. The image is telling you one thing, but the soundtrack is telling you another. And very often the truth lies in, not necessarily in either but in the distance between the two." [36]

Transitions between scenes are often made with music and with rhythmic passages of speech that create associations and new relationships of meaning: the sound attached to the images, from dialogue and music to the most varied vocal gestures, completes, reinterprets and often counterpoints moving images that the montage has already placed in a new context. *The Family Album* may equally be regarded as a montage film, in which inventive, creative editing plays an enormous role.

[36]PBS/POV, *Behind the Lens with Alan Berliner*. Interview with Marc Weiss for the POV broadcast of *The Family Album*, 1989.



For example, as filmic time moves from childhood toward adulthood, a sequence of eight shots appears, accompanied by an out-of-tune violin.[37]

Over the music, in the first shot, a child runs in a circle with somewhat uncoordinated movements, perhaps clowning, and stumbles; then we see children playing tag around a car; then an older girl runs down a hill, looking into the camera. Next, another girl dances energetically with an American flag in her hand, performing for the camera, of course; then another girl, in a coat and cap, dances and salutes, and the salute continues elsewhere, in another season, with yet another girl. Finally a young woman dances on a terrace, while some five adults and a child behind her watch or wave at the camera. The performance ends with the out-of-tune violin run, and we hear applause: a woman's voice says that it was much, much better; then a girl says, "Mama, you keep tapping your feet and I lose the beat."

The scene lasts a mere seventy-five seconds, and it is hard to convey in writing what this dreamlike sequence means, and what associations it awakens about falseness and the wish to conform. It is a gently ironic, almost surreal metaphor for the false repertoire of gestures bound up with the socialization expected of children on their way to adulthood, pulled back to reality by an everyday sentence: "Mama, you keep tapping your feet and I lose the beat." A beautiful sequence, and a triumph of editing.

Of his working method as an editor, Alan said in a book of interviews:

> "For me, editing is about being responsive and open to making discoveries. The key word in making discoveries is "noticing." What catches my eye? What tickles my thought? What moves my gut? What makes me smile? The more you notice, the more connections there are to be made. I always construct my own films as I go along, building up from my initial "noticings" until the film takes on a heartbeat, a pulse, and ultimately, a personality of its own. I've found that making just one good editorial discovery each day—and by that, I mean one cut, one idea, one decision that feels, looks, and sounds good enough to last all the way to the finish line, "a keeper," even if

[37]The violin part in this scene was most likely recorded at some unknown child's violin lesson. The piece is Vivaldi, Violin Concerto in A minor, first movement, RV 356, Op. 3 No. 6. (Author's note.)

> it's the addition or removal of a single shot—is enough to keep me happy, focused, and engaged. As long as I feel the film is getting a little better every day, I'm ready, willing, and able to string together enough of those days into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years if necessary, so that the film can evolve from this slow and steady string of daily accruals. Kind of like the way a bird builds its nest. Twig by twig. Day by day." [38]

It is often the humor created by the editing that brings the old family footage to new life, shaping it into layered, metaphorical, at times absurd or surreal scenes.

As the film moves toward old age and death, the out-of-tune violin returns in one scene, now accompanying a single man clowning for the camera, in a succession of dreamlike images that verge on the absurd.[39]



These family images become a series of meaningless, unusually cheerful and yet surreal gestures: The "four-armed" turn performed for the camera by two men in suits; the senseless movements of a gentleman in a coat dragging a cart-like contraption; the two suited men popping out from behind a gravestone marked GALE, playing hide-and-seek and joking; a man posing on a gravestone and then dancing. All of it evokes an absurdist mood at its finest. And yet behind this false repertoire of gestures, behind the joking that would partly like to ignore mortality and the other exaggerated or meaningless movements, there may lie a kind of fear, an anxiety in the face of death.

Although in the last part of the film, the chapter about death, no family footage of funerals or of the rites surrounding them appears directly on screen, one of the film's most lyrical, disquietingly beautiful and mysterious dreamlike sequences is nonetheless a poetic, metaphorical expression of death. Over the words of a funeral service we see a distant boat on a lake. Then we are in the boat: a man in a hat, whose face we cannot quite see, approaches the deserted shore and lands. There is not a living soul anywhere; the landscape is gray and misty. The mysterious man, a pipe in his mouth, steps out of the boat and unloads it.

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[38]Berliner, A. (2012). "Editing the Self." In G. Oldham, *First Cut 2: More Conversations with Film Editors*, pp. 149–173. University of California Press.

[39]The violin part in this scene was most likely recorded at some unknown child's violin lesson. The piece is François-Joseph Gossec's Gavotte in D major, also known as *Happy Music for Dinner*, which appears in the Suzuki repertoire, in Violin Book 1. In Hungary it is familiar as the title music of the puppet-film series *Mazsola és Tádé*. (Author's note.)

Over the scene we hear the following words:

> "O Lord, who shall dwell in your sanctuary, who shall abide upon your holy mountain?" Fear not death; we are destined to die. We share it with all who ever lived, with all who ever will be. As a drop of water in the sea, as a grain of sand on the shore are man's few days in eternity. The good things in life last for limited days, but a good name endures forever. Help us to endure, O Lord, for we have placed our hope in you." [40]

The heavy grain of the image, the light, the man's half-silhouette, the emptiness of the landscape, the old boat: all of it suggests a kind of timelessness, the quiet, universal timelessness that comes with passing away. Through editing, Alan creates from the raw material of family footage scenes that reach far beyond the private stories of American home movies of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s; he addresses universal questions in the language of the moving image, with extraordinarily varied means and with daring. The elements at work in these often many-layered scenes can reach viewers at very different levels, depending, naturally, on each viewer's sensibility.



Of this scene Alan says:

"Some images reach into deeper levels of thought. For instance, when you set the audio of the funeral against an image of a boat on the water, I couldn't help but think of the Greek myth of Charon carrying the soul to the other world on his ferry. Since I didn't have any footage of a funeral but did have an audio recording of a funeral ceremony, I was able to poeticize the subject by using a series of very evocative, mysterious, and grainy shots of someone in a small boat, alone in the middle of a lake, rowing his way across the horizon. There is also a fragment from a funeral prayer on the soundtrack, referring to some distant shore: "As a drop of water in the sea, as a grain of sand on the shore, so are man's few days in eternity … the good things in life last for limited days." 1 was just making what

[40] *The Family Album* (1986), dialogue transcript.

> seemed like the most powerful connection 1 could, given the limitations of the home movie imagery and the "found audio" I had to work with." [41]

Death, and our relationship to it, is indirectly present in the authorial method that governs the whole film, since by the time it was made many of the adults appearing in the images were already dead.



It is perhaps no accident that the closing scene of *The Family Album* is a genuine affirmation of life: a merry, celebrating crowd dances in the street to country music. People smile into the camera without self-consciousness. Finale. Yes: perhaps film can take up the struggle against transience.

THE FAMILY ALBUM ON THE ROAD TO THE SELF-REFLEXIVE PERSONAL FILM

Alan regards *The Family Album* as a non-narrative collage film, made before he had fully committed himself to storytelling. In its means, methods and style, the film does indeed represent a transition between the collage films and the later works that consistently integrate the elements of the Berlinerian formal language. But it is a transitional work not only in form and style; it is transitional, too, in its handling of the self-reflexive theme of family.

Earlier in this chapter we noted that although Alan used no images of his own family in *The Family Album* for technical reasons, he did use sound, much of which he recorded himself with his divorced parents and other relatives. He probably recorded Oscar and Regina Berliner separately, and he also used earlier material. The recordings and interviews made with his parents for the film were connected to the themes he wished to weave into it, and to what he already wanted to say here, in *The Family Album*, about his own family, without their appearing in the work as prominent, self-reflexive autobiographical elements. It is worth examining, then, how these recordings are used in the film, and why.

Shortly after the opening images and the title of *The Family Album*, around the second minute, Alan gives his parents a voice. We hear Oscar and Regina Berliner over a close-up of an infant:

> "Pudgy - wudgy! You are gonna tell me, that's not a handsome little boy? That's a face. That's a face. Isn't he adorable?" [42]

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[41] Berliner, A. (2012). "Editing the Self." In G. Oldham, *First Cut 2: More Conversations with Film Editors*, pp. 149–173. University of California Press.
[42] *The Family Album* (1986), dialogue transcript.

A viewer who recognized the Berliners' voices might readily associate them with the couple's seemingly happy early years, the carefree moments of an apparently harmonious marriage whose deterioration and eventual breakup, amid daily conflict and quarreling, was a trauma Alan found extremely difficult to come to terms with.

> "Sometimes, after all the shouting and fighting subsided, I used to hide in secret spaces around the house and listen to their private heart-wrenching conversations. As I grew older, I became fascinated with the theater of their phony intimacy, and the various ways they pretended to be happily married in public. They had no idea how obsessed I was. Or how wounded." [43]

It is important to make one thing clear at the outset: at the time of the premiere of *The Family Album*, his parents' voices were not yet known to the wider public, so that apart from Alan only family members, friends, close acquaintances and the most attentive viewers could have caught the personal allusions in the film. And yet Alan's parents are heard relatively early in *The Family Album*; their "solo" and "duet" monologues, or fragments of their conversations, run through almost the entire film, often with delicate irony. For the most part the monologues evoke the family past and its memories, in varying tonal and visual contexts and to differing authorial ends. Although little has been said about this in connection with *The Family Album*, even in the literature on the film, it is worth examining Oscar's and Regina's presence on the soundtrack and the authorial intention and motivation behind it.

At the time of making *The Family Album*, Alan did not yet feel that the time had come to speak with complete openness about the family traumas of his childhood and the demons attached to them, or to involve himself more directly in the film; and yet he felt a strong compulsion to smuggle fragments of his own family's history, half-anonymously, in among the stories of strangers.[44]

Although here his parents' words were still heard over footage shot by others, and were neither personalized nor placed in context for the viewer, I believe this cinematic gesture marked an important step on the road toward the self-reflexive personal documentary.

In all likelihood the fragments of dialogue and monologue involving his parents found their way into the film out of an inner need to work through the childhood traumas Alan has so often mentioned, for reasons both conscious and unconscious.

One possible explanation can be found in an interview Alan gave some years later:

> "Yes, there is a deep psychological hunger—in both films, but particularly in Nobody's Business—to bring my parents back together, to try and facilitate a healing. I was keenly aware of the doomed prospects of my parents' marriage at a very young age, way before a child should have to know about such things." [45]

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[43]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.

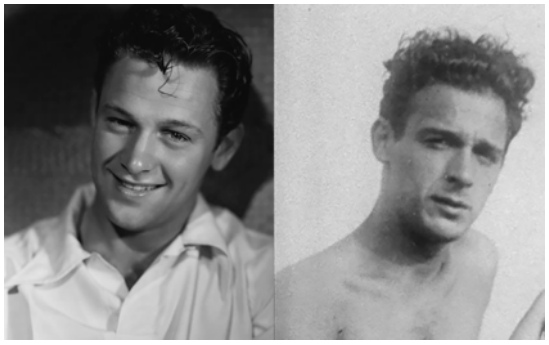
[44]Although Regina Berliner occasionally addresses Alan by name in the recordings, this does not really register with, or mean much to, the average viewer. (Author's note.)

[45]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.

Although in this conversation Alan is referring to *Intimate Stranger* and *Nobody's Business*, the wish to bring his parents back together already appears as a gesture in this film. For example, Alan questions Oscar and Regina Berliner separately, on tape, about how they first met.

Through editing, Alan creates a peculiar mood: in the film, their recollections reconnect his parents; their sentences complete and continue one another, which might even create the illusion of a long-lost harmony, the harmony Alan had always longed for and whose loss had wounded him so deeply as a child.

Regina recalls a date she once went on at her mother's urging: a picnic with a photographer named Horace Bartfield. Although Regina at first welcomed his attentions, he then became too insistent, and she did not want to spend the night with him. Oscar happened to be there, saw what was happening, and liked the young woman. Regina asked Oscar to help her get back to the city. But let us hear it from them:



"Oscar: … And she asked me if I were going back home, would I take her home? Regina: And he said, "Of course." So, I went back to the city with him, from Staten Island. Oscar: Your mother was a very pretty girl. A very young lady. Honestly. Truly. Yeah. Regina: He was quite a handsome man Alan. In fact, he looked like a young version of William Holden, which is true… Oscar: If I say so, I was a rather good-looking guy. Regina: He called very shortly after I had given him my number. Oscar: About three weeks later I called her. But once we started, that was it." [46]

In another scene Alan recalls a fragment of a conversation between his parents whose occasion and subject remain unknown to us. The images he attaches to the argument, however, place the exchange in a gently ironic context. Perhaps this is how such childhood traumas can be loosened, lightened and given a new dimension through humor.

[46] *The Family Album* (1986), dialogue transcript.

"Regina Berliner: -Who started the fights? Oscar Berliner: -Let me tell you something. -Maybe "fights" is not right word - I don't know who started the fights Regina Berliner: -Who instigated? - Who instigated? Oscar Berliner: The question is, I think you're using the wrong terminology, I don't believe these were fights. I' believe these were teasing one against the other." [47]



On screen, meanwhile, a dog approaches a tree a cat has climbed, rears up on its hind legs and waits for the cat to come down so that it can catch it.

Before long, however, the sentences and thoughts that have weighed on Alan since childhood also emerge.

Among the childhood sequences we hear Oscar's voice again:



"Oscar: Because to tell those kind of things you have to go back into the kind of era you lived in. It's not that free exchange era where I can discuss things with my son and have differences of opinions with my son. At the time the head of the family, the father was supreme. His law was the law. You don't follow the law, out you go! That was it. Big deal." [48]

Inevitably, sentences also surface that may hint at the causes of the breakup of an irreparably broken marriage. Regina says in the film:

> "Regina: I really wanted to get away from my father clutches I couldn't say I am going to live alone, the way it's done now, which I should have. But it was impossible. You couldn't do that. So the only thing I could do was to say. "Well I am going to get married." [49]

And Oscar, on marriage:

[47] *The Family Album* (1986), dialogue transcript.
[48] *The Family Album* (1986), dialogue transcript.
[49] *The Family Album* (1986), dialogue transcript.

> "Oscar: It used to be when a person got married, it was "I take you for better or for worse, unit death do us part," and that how it was. You stayed together come hell or high water, Doesn't matter if you were unhappiest person in the world." [50]

Naturally, these passages are heard, in the film's time, within the chapters corresponding to the relevant stages of life, embedded among the other stories and given no special emphasis. Then a sentence catches our ear, spoken by Oscar with a certain irritation, familiar from the later *Nobody's Business*:

> "I've asked you more than once, don't bring this subject up. I just don't want talk about it. I just don't want to talk about it. Period. That's it." [51]

Alan had wanted to raise the subject of his parents' divorce, but audiences would have to wait another decade for that conversation. The autobiographical elements, sentences, questions and memories woven into *The Family Album* were all seeds, sown to come to life in Alan's later works.

In the closing phase of post-production on *The Family Album*, as the edit was being locked, Alan wrote the following in his journal. Although he wrote it on completing his first major project, one that had taken several years, I believe many of us experience something similar whenever we finish a film:

> "As for the film itself, the experience of locking had a (why does it always seem to) frenzy and haphazard feel. (…) I have this image of the film kind of like a ceramic object -- soft and malleable in the summer heat -- everything -- all materials, all decisions, all elements and choices open and fertile with possibility -- a creative cauldron -- a soup getting tastier every day as I continually add, subtract, and re-proportion or should I say refine the recipe. The contour of the film's locking paralleled the onset of autumn, of a cooler climate -- hardening my hand-built film-thing into permanent shape - the wet and shiny veneer evaporating to a drier, crusty surface. All the pictures, sounds, the playful factory of daily editing no longer dance before me, no longer tantalize me with horizons of possibility and the lure of discovery - the prospect that I can make the film better each and every day. It's finished and I have to face it. I must let go - there is no more, ultimately, I can do. And yet… Even now… I see cracks I never saw before. I see shots that could be shorter. I hear sounds that could be louder. I see frames… There will be other films. Let go." [52]

[50] *The Family Album* (1986), dialogue transcript.
[51] *The Family Album* (1986), dialogue transcript.
[52] Alan Berliner's journal, November 12, 1986, 2:29 a.m.

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RECYCLED FAMILY BIOGRAPHY: PERSONAL DOCUMENTARY AND CINEMATIC INVENTION IN INTIMATE STRANGER

THE ORIGINS OF THE FILM

The Family Album was the fruit of five years' work, the result of a long, many-stage creative process. The questions, problems, experiences and decisions that arise in the course of making a film, and their consequences, continually act back on the filmmaker: they shape not only the final form of the work in progress but become, indirectly or even directly, part of the work itself. For Alan this "process," and the openness that goes with it, is an essential part of filmmaking. At the same time, the use of certain cinematic methods and the reciprocal nature of the work, that is, the results and experiences that emerge during editing, may spur the filmmaker to develop new methods. *The Family Album* was very well received by the experimental and documentary communities alike, and met with an exceptionally favorable response at festivals and from critics, all important forms of feedback for an artist. The inspiring experience of making *The Family Album*, and the potential of the moving-image depiction of family life to articulate universal human problems and questions, very likely provided both the motivation and an important foundation for the next step: the creation of a distinctive artistic language and a storytelling technique of his own. After completing *The Family Album*, Alan, now thirty, felt ready to make a film in which he would speak openly and honestly about his own family, creating in the process a bold, highly individual formal language that departed radically from the rules and unspoken norms of traditional documentary storytelling.



But let us go back a little, to the film's roots in Alan's childhood. Between the ages of ten and twelve, Alan often spent weekends at the house of his maternal grandfather, Joseph Cassuto, then in his sixties. He frequently helped his grandfather organize the thousands of letters, photographs and documents Cassuto had set aside, intending one day to write his autobiography from them. Together they looked through thousands of photographs,

attached photographs to letters, and grouped the letters by subject or by the people who appeared in them. In effect, they catalogued this mass of papers and correspondence. His grandfather paid him ten dollars for each afternoon. In time this came to an end, but those afternoons left a lasting mark on Alan:

> "That was sort of a seed planted, a subconscious seed planted, because after his death and he died when I was what 18… So he died six years later. After his death or at the time of his death, I knew that all that material existed, and I knew at some point along the way that it would be mine to reconcile with, mine deal with, mine to open up again." [53]

Alan was still a student at Binghamton when Joseph Cassuto died in 1974. One of Alan's uncles then packed up all the material and stored it in the warehouse behind his office, where these mysterious boxes remained for the next sixteen or seventeen years. In 1988–89 Alan decided that the time had come to retrieve these treasure chests and work through them.

He began by processing and organizing the material. He spent nine months reading and annotating every letter and sorting through several thousand photographs, arranging the vast number of pictures systematically and in chronological order, although most of them were not even dated.

> "I tried to actually like a puzzle put them in order. How did he look younger or older? Is this a period when he wore these kind of glasses or those kind of glasses? Is this a period when he wore this type of suit or that type of suit? Is this a period where he wore a pen in his pocket or he didn't wear a pen in his pocket? Did he look healthy here or not healthy here? Is he surrounded by these people or those people? Just incredible range of criteria to just sort of put all these photographs in order so to speak. I felt that I couldn't begin to make my film until I had learned about the man. And the only way I can learn about the man was to patiently absorb all of the material he left behind. And so having taken notes on every letter he ever received and virtually ever letter he ever wrote which he made carbon copies at that time, I generated, after reading every letter, I generated almost 500 questions interview questions. I had a notebook this thick filled with questions on every subject across his life. As mundane as was he right or left handed. And as broad as, who the hell did he think he was to want to write his autobiography and the implications thereof." [54]

When Alan decided he wanted to make a film about his grandfather, almost everyone tried to talk him out of it. Their main objection was that Joseph Cassuto was a so-called ordinary man whose story would interest no one. Even his most sympathetic friends said: fine, make the film, but ten or fifteen minutes at most, certainly not an hour. When I first heard and read about this, I could hardly understand the objection. It is voiced in the film itself by family members, and Alan has spoken about it in several interviews; yet to me, as a Central European filmmaker, Joseph Cassuto's far from ordinary life is in itself compelling and many-layered. Before turning to the formal innovations of *Intimate Stranger*, and to the

[53] PBS/POV, *Alan Berliner: Uncut*. Interview with Marc Weiss for the POV broadcast of *Intimate Stranger*, 1992.
[54] PBS/POV, *Alan Berliner: Uncut*. Interview with Marc Weiss for the POV broadcast of *Intimate Stranger*, 1992.

boldly and consistently deployed cinematic devices that recur in Alan's later films, let us briefly get to know the story of Joseph Cassuto and his family.

JOSEPH CASSUTO AND HIS FAMILY, IN BRIEF

According to family lore, the Cassutos came from Spain in the years before the Inquisition and, after the expulsion of the Jews, migrated across the Mediterranean toward Palestine. Their journey took them through Italy, where a square in Livorno, the Piazza Diario Cassuto, is said to have been named after them, then on through Greece and Turkey to Lebanon, until they finally settled in Palestine. Joseph Cassuto was born in Palestine in 1905. His father, reportedly a tailor, was killed in fighting between the Turks and the Jews of Palestine, and Joseph's mother moved with her children to Alexandria, Egypt, in the hope of a better life.

Before the Second World War Alexandria was a cosmopolitan port city, a melting pot of cultures. Joseph Cassuto grew up there, speaking English, French, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, Greek and even a little Turkish. The photographs show that he became a Zionist at a young age.



His first job, which he began in 1923, was with the Japanese Trading Company, which imported Egypt's world-class cotton into Japan. Joseph Cassuto effectively came of age at the firm, and in his business outlook and values he identified almost entirely with Japanese culture. He made many Japanese friends, who respected him and accepted him completely.





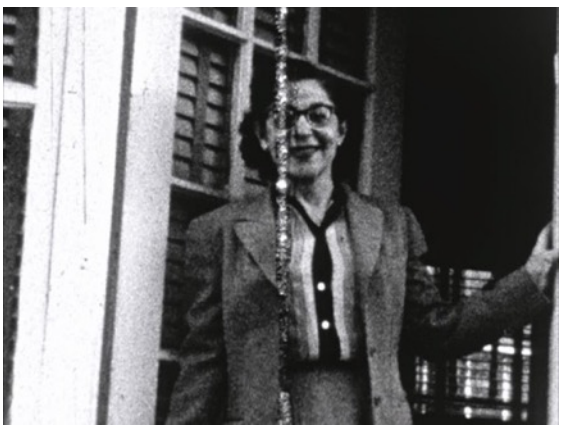
Rose Honig was the sister of Joseph Cassuto's uncle's wife. Cassuto met Rose while visiting the family in the United States; they later married and moved to Egypt.

The prosperous couple had four children, Marc, Regina, Albert and Ben, and lived an upper-middle-class life until the Second World War. As an American, Rose found it hard to get used to life in Alexandria, and her relationship with her mother-in-law was far from easy.

At the outbreak of the war, Alexandria was one of the main bases of the British fleet, and it soon became a target of Italian bombing raids. When German forces came within thirty or forty miles of the city, the American government urged American citizens to leave Egypt. Under the laws of the time, only American citizens and their children aged six or younger could return to the United States. In June 1941 Rose sailed for America with the two younger children, Albert and Ben, on a voyage that took three months. The family hoped that those left behind in Alexandria would soon be able to follow. A few months later, however, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan entered the war and Alexandria was sealed off until the war's end, so that the family was not reunited until 1945.

After the war, life in the United States was anything but easy for the Cassuto family. In the once divided, now reunited household, the children clashed daily along an "American–Egyptian" fault line, waging a kind of culture war among themselves. Joseph Cassuto, shaped by an entirely different business culture, had no success in his new ventures, and his relationship with his wife became strained. He could not adapt to his American surroundings and was unhappy.

After the war, Japan urgently needed to revive its textile trade in order to supply a bombed-out, starving country with food and goods. One of its pillars was a new, complex barter arrangement with Egypt, the source of the raw material. Joseph Cassuto was, almost as a matter of course, called on once again for this task: he became an important figure at the JTC's successor, the Nichimen Corporation, and as a result spent eleven months of every year away from his family. A



successful businessman with great influence and excellent connections in Japanese circles, Cassuto was also offered the exclusive American distribution of the products of Canon, then a fledgling company. Japan's economic role was growing ever more important. Although Cassuto always maintained that he had taken the job to secure his family's financial well-being, his absence weighed heavily on his wife, and his children found it very hard to accept that, after four years apart, they would again have to live without their father for most of the time. In a letter heard in the film, Rose writes to her husband:

> "My Dear Joe, It is a month since you have written, and I have been very patient with my daily disappointments, awaiting mail from you. You don't have to be so far away. You are doing this sacrifice for your children and depriving me of a normal life. This life is good for man who's a bachelor, a widower or one who considers his wife incompatible. I am not as naïve as used to be, to believe that absence makes the heart grow fonder. Companionship means a great deal to me, and I don' mind telling it to you. There is nothing that can compensate for all these lonely years and lack of a normal life. But I guess that's fate, and I have learned to accept it." [55]

In 1956 Cassuto returned to New York and continued working in Nichimen's American office. His house in Brooklyn was always open to Japanese, Egyptian and other guests; he helped everyone, from the immigrant shoeshine boy to the wealthy banker.

His relationship with his family remained strained until the end of his life. One of his sons says of him in the film:

> "I never met anybody who disliked him- other than the immediate family. I would have loved to have his friend instead of his son. Because I think he would do anything for a friend." [56]



In Cassuto's absence, and without his blessing, his daughter Regina chose Oscar Berliner as her husband; Joseph Cassuto opposed the marriage. It produced two grandchildren, Lynn and Alan Berliner.

Not long after his parents' divorce, Alan enrolled in the film department at Binghamton, a choice his grandfather firmly opposed.

Alan recalls it in the film:

> "The last memory that I have is sometime around my entry into college, when I told him I wanted to study filmmaking. He said "Well, maybe that's not such a good idea. Why don't you try and study foreign languages?" [57]

[55] *Intimate Stranger* (1991), dialogue transcript.
[56] *Intimate Stranger* (1991), dialogue transcript.
[57] *Intimate Stranger* (1991), dialogue transcript.

Late in life Joseph Cassuto began work on his memoirs, an autobiography entitled *Life of a Good Samaritan*. His sudden death kept him from finishing it. Many years later, it fell to Alan to tell his grandfather's life story, in an altogether different way.

THE BERLINERIAN MOVING-IMAGE LEXICON: FILM LANGUAGE AND A NEW PATH FOR STORYTELLING IN INTIMATE STRANGER

Although Joseph Cassuto's life story might make exciting raw material for a film, a posthumous portrait poses countless difficulties. How can a film go beyond presenting an interesting life to become a work that is many-layered and at the same time moving and entertaining for an audience? I use the word "entertaining" deliberately, because the storytelling method Alan created represents an important breakthrough in this respect.

In making the film, Alan faced the serious challenge that confronts anyone who wants to make a nonfiction work out of a personal family history: how can a family story be made to interest the public? How can the story of a man the audience sees as average, a so-called ordinary person, be told in an exciting and entertaining way, yet without artistic compromise, so that the film raises and articulates essential questions while also captivating and entertaining its viewers?

Alan found a solution that grew out of his experimental background, in which the visual had always been paramount; out of his gifts as an editor, which had led him to perfect creative sound editing; and out of his temperament as a filmmaker, in which poetry and humor are not mutually exclusive. Along with all this, an important realization took shape:

> "I guess I started to realize that I was really interested in storytelling—in finding ways to express intense emotional and psychological states like pathos and irony, while at the same time also allowing my sense of humor to come out of hiding. I'd like to think the films are entertaining because they're engaging, playful, and unpredictable, as well as lucid." [58]

Alan met this challenge by creating in *Intimate Stranger* an extraordinarily exciting, innovative and visually rich cinematic form, one that becomes a natural vehicle for storytelling without compromising the multiplicity of the ideas, the means of expression or the metaphors, and in which delicate humor and irony become the film's natural element. The elements, methods, repertoire and style of this film language play a large part in the later films as well, giving them an unmistakable authorial signature.

Coming from the avant-garde, Alan set about making the film without regard for genre conventions or traditional practice:

> "My primary focus was on pushing the boundaries of storytelling, making what I had to say as interesting as the way I said it." [59]

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[58]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.
[59]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.



For the film, Alan had at his disposal the vast quantity of photographs and letters he had processed, as well as astonishingly rich 8mm family footage in black-and-white and color; unfortunately, not a single sound recording of Joseph Cassuto survived. Alan therefore gave voice to family members and sought out his grandfather's former Japanese friends and colleagues; he even shot additional sequences in Japan, most of which he photographed himself.

Although this was essentially a story built on factual material, a nonfiction work, his working methods took an entirely different path:

> "Making traditional, making traditional documentary, so called documentary style documentary form films is not in me. I'm not wired that way. And so anytime I make a film, I have to think hard and long about how I'm going to get around the issues of witness or subject identification, and how I'm going to exploit voice over issues in relation to subject matter…" [60]



No screenplay or treatment preceded the making of the film, nor did he write one for any of his later films. In analyzing Berliner's devices and methods, the reason for this is worth examining, since it expresses an important artistic philosophy and the method that goes with it. He has never in his life written a treatment for a film, he told me, and says so without embarrassment; on this point he is quite adamant. He wants each film to be a journey, a process of discovery: to know the point of departure but not where he will arrive. He is at home in that process of discovery, with its false starts, wrong turns and detours, its repeated losing and finding of oneself. This, he believes, is how one discovers things, how one learns them, how deeper and more significant truths are uncovered. A treatment means that you already know everything you need to know about the subject, or already know what the people in the film are going to say; in other words, if you set out to reach a destination along a marked route, that is precisely what will happen. You watch only for that, and never glance sideways at what might open up new horizons, new doors, new possibilities and discoveries. Intuition is a strange thing: you have to let go so that things can happen to you, and stay open so that one thing can lead to another and you are ready for associations, none of which fits within the strict limits a treatment sets.

[60]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.

He has always resisted it: chance is part of the process, the process itself must be the point, and there must be room for change.[61]

Alan recorded many hours of audio with family members and with his late grandfather's friends, but shot no picture during these sessions, for reasons both financial and professional. Every interview for the film lasted at least five hours, and he recorded each person only once, in a single sitting. But what makes a good interview? On this Alan is emphatic. If you follow a written treatment, you sit down with someone already knowing what you want to hear from them, and that, he believes, terribly weakens the situation. When he wants to conduct a good interview, he tries to create a space, a dynamic relationship, a dialogue in which the other person will not only talk about things they have never talked about before, but think things they have never thought before: because of the ideas he is trying to stir up around the subject, the other person will speak and think about it differently than before. In truth, he knows an interview is going well when, while the other person is still speaking, he is already writing down new questions that had not occurred to him before, all the while listening closely to everything being said. And so it may happen that he, or the other person, ends up thinking differently about the question than when he walked through the door. An exciting conversation can arise this way, an argument even, because he is trying to change the direction of the other person's thinking, and the other is doing the same to him. A good interview is thus a process in motion, a conversation in motion, in the course of which the subject may take shape, change, and resurface in different forms and directions. That is what keeps the subject open and makes perspectives and observations flexible. Everyone interprets a question differently, and surely thinks differently about the answers. He believes deeply in these journeys: he wants his films to change him and to help him grow.[62]

From these separately recorded interviews, Alan then constructed a dynamic argument in the editing room:

> "The audio montage of these voice-over interviews was carefully composed, counterpointing and juxtaposing the various interview voices, their conflicting assessments, perspectives and memories of my grandfather. The dynamic interaction of these interview voices created the illusion of a communal audio space, a group discussion. Each interview was, of course, unique and independent of the other." [63]

The available imagery was very rich but extremely heterogeneous: photographs, documents, archival film, and color and black-and-white 8mm family footage. Alan felt he had to devise a unified system that would hold the material together coherently and connect, with complete naturalness, the most varied visual layers, whether still or moving.

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[61]From the author's interview with Alan Berliner, New York (Tribeca), February 20, 2016. The interview was conducted in English; as the original wording was not available for this translation, the passage is rendered in indirect speech rather than as direct quotation.

[62]From the author's interview with Alan Berliner, New York (Tribeca), February 20, 2016. The interview was conducted in English; as the original wording was not available for this translation, the passage is rendered in indirect speech rather than as direct quotation.

[63]Alan Berliner, "Patience and Passion," *DOX—Documentary Magazine*, Autumn 1994, no. 3.

In *Intimate Stranger*, for the first time, a system of sound and image motifs runs through and defines the whole film. Its most important element is the metaphorical device of the old manual typewriter, which brings the grandfather's unfinished autobiography to life through the rich possibilities of film, and from a radically different perspective.

Ten years earlier, in his 1981 short *Myth in the Electric Age*, Alan had already used the sounds of a manual typewriter (the clatter of the keys, the carriage return, the little bell at the end of each line) to structure rapid sequences of abstract images. As so often in Alan's work, where sounds, images and motifs return in another film and another context, the typewriter reappears here as the authorial metaphor of a far more complex cinematic system.

Alan's relationship to metaphor, as he describes it, begins with the fact that for him image and sound are of equal value: sound is not the image's poor relation. He does not usually cut the images first and fit the sound to them afterward. In *Intimate Stranger*, where he used the sound of the manual typewriter both as a metaphor and as a motif running through the whole film, the idea of that sound came before anything else. Once its significance had become clear to him, making the film became far more fluid and far simpler; the sound allowed him to expand the film, and he grasped the power of the metaphor.

In place of the *caméra-stylo* we find the light, personal and at the same time metaphorical system of an authorial "film typewriter," which guides and supports the viewer's perception in many ways, sets accents, has a rhythmic function, and makes present a person not visible on screen: the author himself.

> "Every still photographic image in Intimate Stranger is 'typed' on and off. Every distinct source of visual imagery is punctuated with a specific audio-visual cue. When I get to the end of a specific period in my grandfather's life, a white horizontal bar moves left to right across the frame, signaled by the sound of a typewriter bell and accompanied by the sound effect of a typewriter carriage return. The following shot has the feel of a fresh clean page, a new chapter." [64]

Let us look at a few examples of how this formally exhilarating system works in the film, how it becomes an organic part of the storytelling, and what further artistic devices and solutions enter this new cinematic lexicon. *The Family Album* begins with the countdown of film leader, which also appears at the start of *Nobody's Business*, before the titles (though not as the opening image), signaling that it is part of the film and that we are inside an artistic process in which the viewer participates, since at times even the sound test is audible. In *Intimate Stranger* the countdown is replaced by the keys of an old typewriter striking, shown in close-up in stop-motion, and then the film can begin. It is as though someone were moving the keys: presumably the author, who is about to tell us a story with this disconcerting machine.

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[64] Alan Berliner, "Patience and Passion," *DOX—Documentary Magazine*, Autumn 1994, no. 3.



Meanwhile we hear a siren in the distance; at the ring of the typewriter's bell the image goes dark.

Raindrops on asphalt in close-up, swept by the alternating yellow and red light of a police car, while a man's voice, that of one of Joseph Cassuto's sons, recalls:

> "Take it easy. Everything's all right. Don't worry about it. Your father got into an accident. Everything's all right. Don't worry. "What's happened?" They wouldn't tell me. They wouldn't tell me. Finally, I pumped it out. He was walking across the street in the rain and was hit by the car. But yet, I don't believe that was fatal. I believe he was thrown into the curb. I think his head hit the curb and I think that's what killed him." [65]

After a cut we see the rotating light of a police car in close-up, slowly turning. A woman's voice, Regina Berliner's, continues the recollection:

> "He had no ID to speak of on him, except a shopping list on an old Florida hotel bill, And they were able to trace the name to the address and the phone number. I can still hear my screams. The police department put up signs on the trees and on the telephone poles. The driver was never found." [66]

Although we hear only the narrators' voices, over the slow, monotonous close-up of the police light with raindrops in the foreground, these seemingly simple means create a chilling tension. The short, evocative sentences patter like the rain; we can almost see the cordoned-off accident scene and the policeman poring over the hotel bills by flashlight. *They never found the driver of the car*: the sentence falls with finality; a life has ended here. The sequence closes with a keystroke and the ring of the bell.



A rapidly descending strip of film leader opens the next sequence: details of a police report in extreme close-up, with a word here and there marked with a highlighter. This kind of visual element will recur many times in the film. The fragments of words in the jerkily moving, almost convulsing report vibrate as we hear the roar of a car engine driving off into the distance. Meanwhile the man's voice describes what he saw the next day at the morgue, when he identified his father's body. The opening is highly suggestive; the viewer immediately wants to know what has happened. All the while the film's system of signs and devices is in motion, creating a mood and establishing unspoken rules without the viewer becoming conscious of them.

[65] *Intimate Stranger* (1991), dialogue transcript.
[66] *Intimate Stranger* (1991), dialogue transcript.

Next we see a great many postage stamps and learn from the off-screen voices that the accident victim had been working on his autobiographical novel. Another man's voice interjects sarcastically: who the hell is he to write a biography of himself, and who the hell would be interested in his story?

Though the question is more of a statement, it still presupposes someone to whom it is addressed, and that can only be the person operating this peculiar typewriter: the author, the film's director. The voices already establish a web of relationships around the deceased, and it is clear that the film will be about this mysterious man. The titles can begin, and the keys are already moving. Over the titles we hear the doubting voices: will anyone be interested at all? This is not *Rain Man*, nor is it *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*?

Very quickly, however, the speakers' differences of opinion develop into a debate, an element that recurs often on the soundtrack and gives the film its dynamism.

Around the third minute, Oscar Berliner names the film's protagonist and makes it clear that he himself is the director's father:

> "Oscar Berliner: He was a nothing, a nobody. Joseph Cassuto, may rest in peace, did not impress me. I wouldn't give you two cents to see a film about him. I'm not even sure, if you let me in for free, if I would go. I defy anybody to tell me something substantial, worthwhile, outstanding that he did." [67]

Then, in strong Japanese accents, old friends and colleagues praise Cassuto, and we learn at once that he was the filmmaker's grandfather:

> "As a grandson you have to be very proud of your grandfather" [68]

The off-screen voices thus sketch the emotions and relationships surrounding the protagonist, aided by the archival material. The film moves forward and develops within its own system of signs. The formal elements of the Berlinerian moving-image lexicon emerge, together with the cinematic methods and the personal style that will define his later films.



Alan quotes a kind of *ars poetica* from Joseph Cassuto's manuscript, which provokes vehement objections from Oscar Berliner. Then the text of a typed manuscript runs past in extreme close-up, only a few words legible, while the rhythmic clatter of the typewriter gives the film a powerful momentum. The photographs and other visual motifs that follow one another in varying rhythms, stamps and seals, are set in motion and brought to life by the rhythm of the typewriter, as though the sentences of a film were being born on screen. Jonathan Rosenbaum writes in his article "The Grandfather" in the *Chicago Reader*:

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[67] *Intimate Stranger* (1991), dialogue transcript.
[68] *Intimate Stranger* (1991), dialogue transcript.

> "A film about the mysteries of personality and the vagaries of memory, built on principles of both overload and absence, Intimate Stranger begins, ends, and proceeds with the sound and rhythms of typing, which are matched precisely to the rhythms of the film editing. A form of both punctuation and propulsion, the typewriting—often equated with thinking, speaking, and questioning—creates an artificial order out of a seemingly formless wealth of material. Again and again, each struck typewriter key corresponds to a shot in the film, and a machine-gun volley of clattering keys and shots implies not only sentences and film sequences but days and weeks, months and years and seasons, cities and countries and continents, children and friends, letters and stamps and envelopes, photographs and snapshots and home movies, newspapers and clippings—a profusion of things and events crowded into over 15 cartons of memorabilia, the film's starting point." [69]



Then the extraordinarily rich archival footage begins, evoking an eventful life not without its secrets and contradictions. Through the portrait of Joseph Cassuto, decisive and tragic moments of twentieth-century history also come into view.

I have discussed the opening of the film in such detail because in these five or so minutes, condensed, precise and consciously constructed almost frame by frame, a mode of storytelling and a distinctive narrative style come into being that will carry the entire film. At the same time the direction creates a mood, arouses our curiosity about the protagonist, and introduces, through sound, the other main characters with whom the viewer will spend the next hour. The filmmaker positions himself within the film and sets up a dispute, signaling that the film will be about a figure not free of contradictions. And he introduces the visual elements and codes the film will use.

Intimate Stranger is a work of decisive importance in Alan's career, the first to deal openly with part of his own family history. Through the story of his maternal grandfather, many important questions about family, identity and twentieth-century history are raised in a wholly original and highly individual work that resists traditional genre categories. Alan said in an interview for PBS:



> "You know when I work, especially now as I get older or something, I'm less concerned with categories. Like what kind of film is it. Ok. It's a personal documentary; it's an experimental documentary. Certain people in the world need those names, those labels. It's a documentary but it uses avant-garde technique to do something. Whatever… none of those things matter to me. I made my film. I made a film that I wasn't afraid to try

[69] Jonathan Rosenbaum, "The Grandfather," *Chicago Reader*, June 19, 1992.

> anything within, I wasn't, I didn't feel I was pandering to any broad common denominator, in any way. I made my film." [70]

The international press received this singular and daring work with unqualified enthusiasm. Hal Hinson wrote in the *Washington Post*:

> "The film is a little wonder - funny, probing and so wholly original in both style and substance as to seem completely without precedent. A brilliant, one-of-a-kind film… the remarkable life of a seemingly average man presents a figure as complicated and enthralling as any fictional character in recent memory… (…) Technically, the picture is a documentary, but the form it takes is so distinctly personal that it refuses to fit neatly into any category. (…) intoxicating montage…expertly pieced together… a spectacular high-wire feat by a fledgling master." [71]

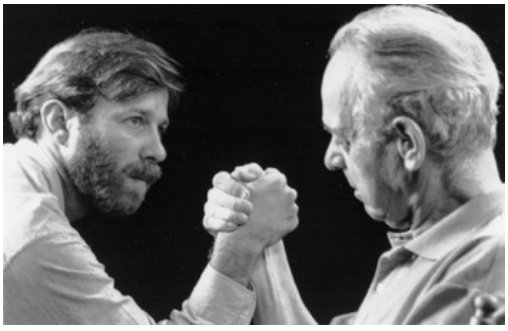
[70]PBS/POV, *Alan Berliner: Uncut*. Interview with Marc Weiss for the POV broadcast of *Intimate Stranger*, 1992.
[71]Hal Hinson, "The Wonder of 'Stranger,'" *The Washington Post*, June 5, 1992.

VI

NOBODY'S BUSINESS: ANATOMY OF A "BOXING MATCH"

THE BACKGROUND

After *Intimate Stranger*, the visually rich and narratively innovative film analyzed in the previous chapter, and the first in which he used part of his own family history as raw material, Berliner raised the stakes. He set himself a new challenge and chose a far more sensitive subject as the point of departure for his next work.



Nobody's Business focuses on the director's father, Oscar Berliner, then in his late seventies, and on the complex, at times tense and contradictory, yet deeply intimate relationship between the two men. The film's premise seems very simple: the director is making a film, a portrait, of his father, which might at last provide the occasion for a real, searching conversation that had never been possible before. Questions unwittingly buried, words left unsaid, all that had lurked between them over the long years, might finally be raised. Perhaps a true and honest conversation between father and son can only come about in this way, and perhaps the film can be the means of it. Perhaps the filmmaker is setting a clever trap for his hard-to-reach father, in order to fight the Oedipal struggle on his own ground.

Alan Berliner had long been troubled by his father's pessimism, disillusionment and cynicism, and by the closed-off life in which his days passed joylessly and without friends. For years, whenever they met, his father greeted him not with *hello* but with: my head aches terribly; I didn't sleep at all last night; my eyes hurt. At the same time his father refused to engage in any real dialogue, something Berliner conveys with a metaphor:

> "I knocked on his door- no answer. I rang the doorbell- no answer. I rang the doorbell many times-no answers. I stood back and I yelled at the window- no answer. I grabbed a big rock and I threw I at the window-no answer. Finally, what to do? I made this film." [72]

The director and professor Michael Rabiger writes in his classic book:

[72] PBS/POV, interview with Alan Berliner, June 3, 1997.

> "Like all films that really illuminate family life, this one shows how the important doors never open until the director pushes and pushes. Power (that is, vital information that tells you who you are) is never given. You take it when you decide to grow up" [73]

The director felt that he could not really set his own life in order until he had somehow come to terms with the story of this wounded man, who in this case was his *father*. Making the film might also give Alan Berliner the chance to come closer to everything that the power of family, and the essence of belonging to a family, mean to him emotionally. After the perfectionist *Intimate Stranger*, he felt that the distance between the film's protagonist, his late maternal grandfather Joseph Cassuto, and himself as filmmaker had somehow grown, and this left him somewhat dissatisfied. He needed to make a new film in which he would be far more personally present, reveal more of himself and take a greater risk, making himself far more vulnerable and thereby coming closer to understanding the problems and traumas that had remained unspoken and had haunted him for decades. At the time of shooting *Nobody's Business*, Alan Berliner was in his forties and his father in his late seventies.

OSCAR BERLINER, FATHER AND "FILM STAR"

But who is Oscar Berliner, this quarrelsome, cantankerous, sullen, grumbling, peevish, sardonic, irritable, sensitive, contrary, capricious, eccentric, needling, reluctant, obstinate old man whom eleven hundred spectators at the New York Film Festival premiere at Lincoln Center celebrated with a spontaneous ovation and minutes of sustained applause? Whom millions of viewers took to their hearts and fondly remembered after the release of *Nobody's Business*? And from whom, against his will, we learned so much in the space of a single hour?

Oscar Berliner was born in New York, the tenth child of a large family of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, from Poland and Russia.

His father, Benjamin Berliner, a first-generation immigrant, was born in 1877 in Rajgród, in what is today Poland. Oscar's grandfather Solomon Isaac Berliner, whom he never met, taught reading, writing and Torah as a *melamed* in a religious elementary school, or *cheder*, in that Polish market town. At his father's urging, and because of unbearable poverty, Benjamin emigrated to America while still very young. In 1899 he married Sara Meyerowitz; over the years they had thirteen children, eleven of whom survived to adulthood. Benjamin was a stern, withdrawn, sullen, cold and unapproachable man, and so Oscar, a late child who grew up in the hard years of the Depression, received all his tenderness and love from his mother, Sarah.



In his twenties, during the Second World War, Oscar Berliner served in the navy; after the atomic bombings he was posted to Japan, where he spent about a year. Because of his

[73]Michael Rabiger, *Directing the Documentary*, 6th ed. (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2015).

high IQ he was treated favorably, so military service was no particular hardship. He was happy in the service among his comrades; at the same time, as a proud American serviceman, he never set foot in the home of a single "Jap," since he regarded the Japanese as sworn enemies. For all that, he looked back on his years in uniform as the happiest period of his life, and remembered his fellow servicemen with nostalgia ever after.



Back in the United States, Oscar, who had an excellent head for business, went into manufacturing and selling sportswear. The business did reasonably well, and he became a fairly successful entrepreneur. He was popular with clients and staff alike: thanks to his winning manner, and above all his reliability and honesty, his employees adored him. By then the handsome young New Yorker had a wide circle of friends and an active social life, the master of his own existence, with girlfriends and dates. Yet none of his romances developed into a serious relationship, into love; each girl left him with a sense that something was missing, until he met Regina, some thirteen years his junior, a cultivated, multilingual actress and the daughter of the prosperous Sephardic textile merchant Joseph Cassuto.



They married in Queens in the summer of 1954. Two years later their first child, Alan, was born, followed by their daughter Lynn. Oscar was an excellent father who adored his children and spent a great deal of time with them, especially with his son. As a father he wanted, and was able, to give far more love than he had received from his own stern, cold and sullen father, a capacity he believed he had inherited from his mother, Sarah. For Oscar Berliner, then in his forties, family and children very likely meant everything, but that was not enough to make the marriage work. In all likelihood the considerable differences in outlook and values stemming from their cultural and family backgrounds, Regina Berliner's ambitions as an actress and her desire for freedom, and of course the difference in age all contributed to the eventual breakdown of the marriage. Regina usually spent her evenings at the theater or performing at various venues, building a career and a life of her own from which her husband was increasingly excluded. Oscar felt ever lonelier but wanted, for the children's sake, to hold the marriage together at all costs. After seventeen years they divorced, which came as a shock to the children, above all to Alan, by then a teenager.

After the divorce Oscar Berliner became withdrawn and embittered. He never remarried and lived on, disillusioned and alone, without friends. Even after many years his wounds did not heal. Nor could he, or would he, establish a truly trusting and open relationship with

his children, though he clearly loved them and was attached to them. At the time the film was made he was living in a retirement home in New York.

We first briefly encountered Oscar Berliner in *Intimate Stranger*, where he said this, and little more, about his former father-in-law:

> "My question to you is, who the hell is he to write his autobiography and who in the hell would be interested in it? (…) He was a nothing a nobody. (…) Joseph Cassuto, may rest in peace, did not impress me. (…) Autobiography by a nobody." [74]

After *Intimate Stranger*, Alan Berliner felt that the time had come to make a film about a subject of defining importance in his life, one he had very likely been preparing for a long time: his father, his relationship with him, and the immediate and extended family. The project's working title was *House of Cards*, and ITVS became one of its principal funders.[75]

Alongside the clearly strong inner motivations, there was a sad fact that made further delay impossible: his father's deteriorating health. This is a factor we cannot ignore in thinking about the film. From *Nobody's Business* we learn that Oscar Berliner underwent two brain operations, which left him completely deaf in one ear, while in the other he could barely hear because of a hereditary hearing impairment. Alan recalled this at his father's funeral:

> "First there was the brain tumor back in the mid 1960's -- a time before cat scans and MRI's. Most people don't know that the surgeons never actually took out the entire tumor. That my father was forced to make a decision between having it totally removed or being disfigured on the right side of his face for the rest of his life. It must have been nightmarish for him to know that there was a tumor growing ever so slowly inside his head all these years. That brain surgery left him permanently deaf in one ear. The severe hearing loss in his other ear was just genes -- "a gift from his mother's side of the family," as he would say." [76]



At the end of 1991 Oscar Berliner's condition suddenly deteriorated. Alarming disturbances of movement and behavior appeared, requiring urgent surgery. Alan flew to Florida at once and, by various stratagems, got his father to a doctor; Oscar was then operated on at Tisch Hospital in New York, after which his condition improved and then stabilized.

> "Within a month my father had surgery, and ironically had he not had surgery I certainly couldn't have even made this film." [77]

Over the years Oscar Berliner, an amateur filmmaker, had shot a great deal of Super 8 home footage, which from the outset was one of the film's important sources. The family

[74] *Intimate Stranger* (1991), dialogue transcript.
[75] ITVS (Independent Television Service), a San Francisco–based organization that funds innovative documentary and independent production for the American public television channels, PBS and APT.
[76] Alan Berliner, eulogy delivered at Oscar Berliner's funeral.
[77] PBS/POV, interview with Alan Berliner, June 3, 1997.

archive is also extremely rich in photographs and contains other highly usable video material. And over the years Alan had bought and collected a great quantity of amateur 16mm footage and home movies, from which *The Family Album* was made.

Here we should mention an artistic method that may seem unusual but that the director uses fairly often. Alan sees nothing taboo in reusing archival material and scenes from his earlier films. He frequently quotes from his own work: *Nobody's Business* borrows at least seven minutes of material from his previous film, *Intimate Stranger*. Sounds, effects and noises are likewise often repeated or reused from one work to another.[78] And his comprehensive historical and archival research, thorough and attentive to every detail, is not merely part of the preparation but part of the creative process itself: it takes on a function in the storytelling and is thus built into the film.

Arranging the planned interviews with family members went far more smoothly than expected. Cousins from every corner of the United States, even some Alan had never met, readily agreed to be filmed and traveled to New York for the shoots.

But how did the film's protagonist, Oscar, respond to his son's idea and request?

> "I knew he'd be resistant. I knew he hated my grandfather, who in Intimate Stranger he calls "a nothing and a nobody." So, naturally, when I began Nobody's Business, I came back at him and asked, "If he's a nothing and a nobody, then what are you?" And he would humbly say, "I'm just an ordinary person who lived an ordinary life." My father liked to hide in that proverbial big crowd. At various points during Nobody's Business he claims to be "one of millions, or billions or even 'ski jillions' of people." I knew he'd be dismissive of my approach before I started the film, but I didn't know that I would not be able to convince him of anything. I do not convince him of one thing in the film. Not one." [79]

One might well suppose that the differences and tensions between them were at once a difficulty for the work and an obvious advantage for the film. One thing is certain: the project posed a serious challenge to Alan Berliner as a filmmaker, who had to express, sensitively and effectively in the language of the moving image, a subject that is an important part of his life, while maintaining, as Oscar Berliner's son, his emotional and intellectual stance toward his father: authentically, sensitively, empathetically, and at times with unsparing honesty. The stakes were high: the film itself, and the relationship between the two of them. The director had to position two people, guide them delicately, and see the dynamics of their relationship from the outside, both in the film and in the *process* of making it: Oscar and Alan Berliner.

It is important to mention here a filmmaking attitude and technique that is a key part of Alan Berliner's artistic universe and is organically built into his films: the PROCESS, the creative process itself. In Alan's work, some stage of the road that led to the finished work is often part of the storytelling; his films also reflect on the creative process itself.

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[78]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.

[79]Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.

Oscar Berliner stubbornly resists his son's plan to make a film and questions its legitimacy:

> "I am a plain, ordinary man. There is nothing to make a movie about. You're wasting our time! I was in the army. Got married. I raised a family, worked hard, had my own business, that's all. That's nothing to make a picture about! It's ridiculous!" [80]

An exchange like this, in which the filmmaker is trying to persuade his subject to take part, is rarely left in a documentary. Here, however, it serves a dramaturgical function as an important piece of exposition: it elegantly establishes a set of relationships and rules that the film then consistently follows. On one side, Alan's stubborn investigative stance, aimed at uncovering and naming family secrets and silences; on the other, the father's evasive behavior, now defensive, now on the attack, in his own sardonic manner. This sparring (see below: *boxing*) gives the film intense momentum and is, not least, the source of its finely calibrated and remarkably complex humor, both direct and indirect.

> "There are so many ironies. It's a film about him, despite him. He's a "hero" because he refuses to be a hero. He reveals as much about himself through his resistance to telling his life story as anything I could ever say about him. What's sad can be funny, but often what's funny is funny because it's also so sad. In the end, it's the strength of his character that allows people to admire him and feel sorry for him, to laugh with him and at him, to judge him and feel compassion for him—all at the same time." [81]

At the same time, let us step back for a moment and consider, by Oscar Berliner's own values, what he so stubbornly repeated about the ordinariness of his person and his life. His life could indeed be seen as the fairly conventional story of a second-generation American, without any particularly tragic turns, and he accepts the blows life has dealt him with modest, stoic wisdom. Why should it concern anyone? It is, he protests, *nobody's business*.

> "The more my father tried to tell me that his life wasn't interesting. That he was ordinary, average, nothing special, in fact he says, "My life is nothing." -- the more I wanted… the more I wanted to make this film. The more important it became to me to make this film. If not necessarily to prove him wrong, but perhaps to give his life a new meaning, for him and for me." [82]

Alan, meanwhile, has to show that this reinterpretation, this kind of moving-image therapy, can also work as a film and stir thoughts and feelings in an audience. The film's great challenge, and one of the key questions of the creative process, is how this singular, seemingly everyday and intensely personal material, a family history, can be shaped into moving images that an audience can also experience: a work of art that is many-layered, thought-provoking and captivatingly entertaining at the same time.

> "So, to a certain extent as I was making the film, it was very important for me to understand that I was not making a film about my family but I was hopefully making a film that transcended the specificity, the detail of my family and that could become a

[80] *Nobody's Business* (1996), dialogue transcript.
[81] Berliner, A., & MacDonald (2006). "Alan Berliner." In S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, pp. 143–179. University of California Press.
[82] PBS/POV, interview with Alan Berliner, June 3, 1997.

> window or a mirror for everyone else out there who might want to reflect on their own families on their own relationships" [83]

Despite his doubts, Oscar Berliner agrees to a film being made about him. We must not forget that, partly as a result of one of the brain operations, he is practically deaf, which severely limits his social contact; he lives an entirely withdrawn and secluded life. It cannot have been easy for him to agree, but I hardly think he had much choice: he feels that Alan needs him, and perhaps, unconsciously, that he too needs this occasion, this film.

> "One of the big dangers throughout the making of the film was that I could lose my relationship to my father. That at any moment and I'm talking not only during the shooting of the film but even during the editing of the film, let alone when he finally saw the film -- that our relationship could go totally out of control. And that frightened me. And in fact, I had to turn that fear into a kind of fuel. I had to turn that fear into a kind of energy that propelled me and gave me the courage to go forward, to persevere, to see it through." [84]

Nobody's Business, which I consider one of the most important works of contemporary American personal, authorial documentary, is a virtuoso realization of a precisely formulated and thoroughly considered directorial conception. It is an authorial film essay that reflects on personal material and is visually extremely rich, bold and innovative in its editing, and captivatingly entertaining. The film freely combines the devices of fiction, experimental cinema and documentary; its storytelling technique is independent, boldly sets its own rules, and is at the same time extremely consistent.

NOBODY'S BUSINESS: THE DEVICES AND METHODS OF STORYTELLING

Over the film's opening images we hear Oscar Berliner telling a joke: a man goes to an artist and says he would like to have a picture made. The artist looks at him and says: look, there are two kinds of picture, portrait and landscape. Which is cheaper? the man asks. The landscape, says the artist. Fine, says the man, then could you paint a landscape of me?



Meanwhile, in black-and-white archival footage, we see a crowd from above, in slow motion, as if waiting for something. Then a bleak landscape: a bare tree standing alone in the distance, sparsely ringed by shrubs, so that it looks a little like an island. The black-and-white archival images open the film poetically, with a metaphor, while the joke gently comments on, and in its mood counterpoints, the abstract timelessness the images suggest. The landscape of the joke relates

[83] PBS/POV, interview with Alan Berliner, June 3, 1997.
[84] PBS/POV, interview with Alan Berliner, June 3, 1997.

indirectly to the landscape on screen, to the tree, and to Oscar. The tree is an important visual motif and metaphor in Alan Berliner's films; it plays a major role, for example, in *First Cousin Once Removed.*

I believe that some black-and-white 16mm and 8mm archival newsreel and amateur footage can give rise to a spontaneous poetry of recorded reality, without any artistic ambition whatsoever. Such footage, with its technical flaws, or sometimes precisely because of them, can be worth its weight in gold to a professional filmmaker. It is the unrepeatable imprint of an era, with its grainy texture, and with the naturalness and dreamlike quality with which it captures the past in personal gestures: everyday life's contribution to the collective anthropological memory of the moving image.



Over the black-and-white opening images, then, musicians are tuning up, as though we were still waiting for events to begin; the slow, expectant surge of the crowd suggests that something is about to happen. The dissonant, faintly cacophonous sound we are used to hearing before concerts here renders the acoustic world of the crowd: a multitude of individuals, each seeking his own voice and harmony, among whom no consonance, no harmony, can arise; a multitude of separate, alienated individuals. Consonant musical passages and songs, by contrast, generally appear in the film within the world of the individual and the family, in varying tonal and functional roles according to the dramaturgical purpose.[85] Scenes of crowds in various forms (immigrants, marching soldiers, a jostling throng at a handout) recur many times in the film with this same acoustic setting, each time with a different function and meaning.

The screening, then, is about to begin; latecomers may still take their seats, but they had better hurry, for the show starts in a moment. The projector starts up, the leader runs through the gate, a countdown, the numbers filing past to the monotonous ticking of a metronome, while Oscar Berliner does a microphone check: testing, one-two-three, one-two-three. A production, then, in which we take part even *before* it begins, and while it is being shot, and yet we have not yet seen the protagonist.

Before all *this* begins, the subject asks, just to be sure: Alan, how long will this take? About an hour, comes the firm, concise answer. With this reply Alan is also addressing us: in a single gesture he links the space and time of that first exchange to his film, to its running time, and to the viewers. It is as though he were creating a virtual space with its own time frame, whose duration equals the length of the film. He fills this "space" with spectators and, delicately and indirectly, speaks to us through Oscar. He also suggests a seeming linearity, as though everything from that question onward were happening in real time: a journey, a negotiation, a boxing match. He is counting on us, on our attention, on our participation as viewers. A bell closes Alan's answer and the sequence, and opens the next.

[85]For example: the gramophone music attached to the letter written to Benjamin Berliner; Doris Day, "Sentimental Journey"; Edith Piaf, "Non, je ne regrette rien"; "The Nearness of You" attached to Oscar and Regina Berliner. (Author's note.)

The film has scarcely begun, and already we hear the characteristic effects and sounds that are the staple acoustic elements of Alan Berliner's moving-image laboratory. Among them is the distinctive sound of the metronome, which plays a varied role in the sound dramaturgy of *Nobody's Business* as well. Depending on the scene, it gives rhythm and momentum to a succession of still images, but at times it also takes on a metaphorical function. The ticking of a pendulum swinging between two extremes, reinforced visually, can serve as an acoustic metaphor of *either/or*. The editing brings out this effect together with the images that go with it, as in the scene recalling the traumatic memory of the parents' divorce (see: *him, her*). Another frequently recurring sound effect is the ticking and ringing of a wind-up kitchen timer, which the director often uses to quite different dramaturgical effect. It is worth noting again that it is no accident that he handles noises, effects and the most varied acoustic devices with such inventiveness: as mentioned in Chapter III, after his university years Alan Berliner worked for years as a sound editor and archivist and brought the art of creative, sophisticated film sound editing to perfection, earning several Emmys in the process.

The bell starts the first round. The director shows Oscar an old photograph to get the conversation going, but his father immediately and modestly corrects him: he is only posing for the camera, nobody should read anything more into it, even if he does stand there elegantly with a microphone in his hand. Not at all; let no one imagine otherwise; excuse me. Naturally, an argument develops at once. The film continues to suggest that events are unfolding in real time, as Oscar wants to set the record straight right away: Alan, before we go any further, let me tell you something: I'm an ordinary fellow. And he explains why a film about him is not worth making. The director suggests to the audience that, by their presence, they are taking part in real time in the filmmaking process itself.

> Alan: "Somebody watching this film is going to say, why am I here watching this film about this guy?"
>
> Oscar: "I could ask the same question, because I don't know what the hell I'm doing here. I'm being honest with you."
>
> Alan: "You should feel honored."
>
> Oscar: "I don't."

The needling, quarrelsome, argumentative basic situation takes shape, together with the vibrant tension, shot through with delicate humor, that keeps the film moving.

Oscar's words are ironically counterpointed by a scene built from black-and-white archival material: journalists, photographers and radio reporters at work; a throng in the street, then a crowd watching an important event, perhaps *Somebody*.

A camera held aloft, journalists taking notes, old newsreel cameras rolling: clearly they are covering some very important occasion. This scene of less than a minute, about fifty-five seconds, consists of thirteen plus two shots, probably from entirely different newsreel sources. The well-constructed montage makes the scene dynamic by alternating the directions of gaze and introducing new motifs, establishing a subtle, by no means direct, relationship with the spoken text. Alan Berliner uses archival material the way scenes are built in a narrative film: changes of shot size, precise cinematic construction from different angles and camera positions. His irony is very delicate; loud, cheap jokes are foreign to him. This ironic mode of expression naturally demands cinematic precision and inventiveness.

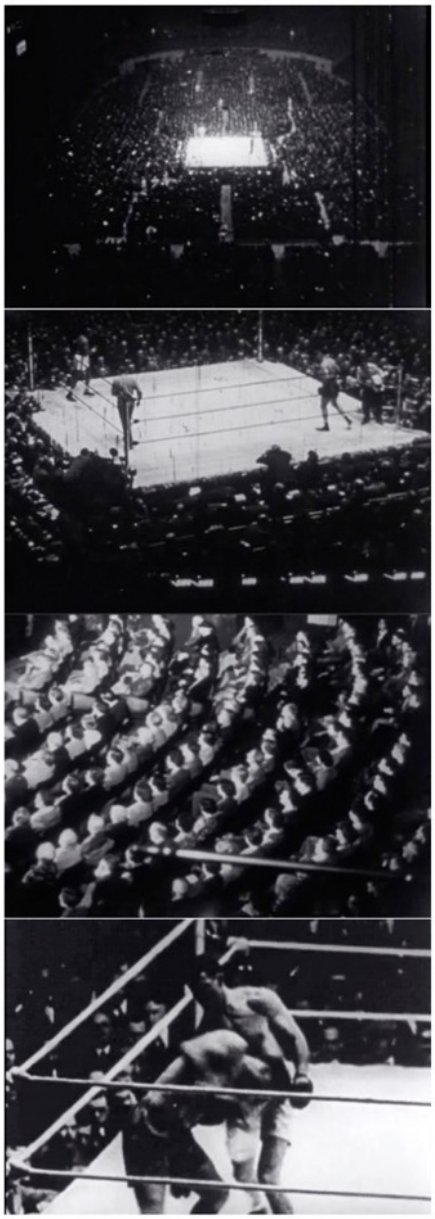


Oscar first appears on screen after the titles; he settles in somewhat reluctantly and then, looking into the camera, asks: what's happening now?

At once we are at a boxing match: first the arena in a wide shot, the ring in the distance; then the bell opens the bout and the first question comes. As a metaphor for the clash between father and son, archival boxing footage recurs four more times in the film, at moments of verbal confrontation of varying intensity. The basic situation: Alan is the challenger, Oscar the champion. But let us see where the boxing metaphor came from, what preceded it, and how the idea developed:

> "Over the years, my father had jokingly described some of our conversations as a kind of "verbal sparring," and so I had the idea early on of using some old archival boxing footage as a far-reaching metaphor for the Oedipal drama of our relationship, the collision of generations, and the way that words and ideas can function as punches and counterpunches in the course of a conversation—in the life of a relationship. My first inclination was to structure the film as a fifteen-round title bout, with title cards announcing the start of each round. The more I thought about it, though, the more I realized that doing so would put an unnecessary emphasis on keeping score; the audience might get too involved in the game of who's winning and who's losing. I was much more interested in representing the resiliency of the battle, a kind of nonstop perpetual exchange, more in tune with the real dynamics of family life. You'll notice

that there are no knockouts in the boxing footage, just a lot of punching, scuffling, and holding on." [86]



At the beginning of the film the fighters are still feeling each other out. A warm-up question: where are you from? Oscar shoots back: American. The director naturally does not accept this answer, and the verbal duel can begin. Alan reminds his father once more that they are not alone: everyone has a story, and *they*, the viewers, want to know yours. In the next round, however, a real clash occurs when the conversation turns to a forgotten but painful chapter of the Berliner family history: Alan asks his father about the two siblings who died shortly after being born prematurely. The third round concerns what is perhaps the most painful subject for them both, and one Alan is determined to discuss: his parents' divorce. Of the five boxing scenes, this is perhaps the most intense and the hardest, and no wonder, since for Oscar the divorce was the greatest disappointment of his life, and for the director an enormous trauma. The fourth round, and its exchange of blows, grows out of Oscar's loneliness and Alan's reproach at the situation that had developed over the years, at his father's withdrawal and passivity. In the fifth and final round Alan takes some hard punches: Oscar does not feel that making the film is doing him any good, nor that the work in progress is an expression of Alan's love for him.

If we follow the boxing metaphor consistently, the film "broadcasts" a match in which the fighters' scores, or rather their performance before the audience, depend on a referee who is also one of the fighters. The referee (the director) must therefore be very wise, for several reasons: for Oscar's sake, for the film's, and of course for the viewers'. Even in such a situation viewers need someone to root for, need to be able to identify at some level with a protagonist who, precisely in his contradictions, is an interesting and lovable figure. (The flawlessly good are dull.) However strange it may sound, in the personal authorial documentary a character must be "built" just as in a fiction film, in full awareness of, and building on, the fundamental fact that the material of the

[86]Berliner, A. (2012). "Editing the Self." In G. Oldham, *First Cut 2: More Conversations with Film Editors*, pp. 149–173. University of California Press.

work consists of real events, a real person, a family, a community, and that this can be a significant strength.

Oscar Berliner's basic position, which follows directly from his values and temperament, is that he does not want to appear in the film as anything other than what he really is: honest and blunt, wise but not pedantic, convincing, authentic, with a real and deep sense of humor. Yet these qualities do not necessarily come across on film by themselves. Imagine for a moment, with horror, what kind of film might have been made from the story of this very lovable man as a classic talking-head documentary built on in-depth interviews, with proper cutaways and so on. He would have been lost among countless others. The film's vibrant tension, its exciting handling of time, its visual richness and its innovative sound world all serve to draw the viewer emotionally into the story and to bring as close as possible the personality of a protagonist with whose opinions, reactions and gestures one can identify, or with whom one can argue.

The question arises: by what devices and methods can a protagonist be presented and developed dynamically and excitingly in a personal, authorial documentary? One possible method is to place the protagonist, during shooting, in a situation where he must express himself amid conflicting relationships, where he must form an opinion, react, decide or act; where, willingly or not, he is confronted with the negative, or even the positive, consequences of his own actions, decisions or indecision. The source of conflict in this film is the tension in the father–son relationship: the vast differences in outlook and values, and the significant divergences in their relationship to the past, to the extended family, to identity. Here the director does not ask his questions merely as an interviewer; as Oscar's son, he confronts his father with what they lived through together, with his indifference and his cynicism. As the challenger, to stay with the boxing metaphor, Alan can be aggressive and demanding, since what is at stake concerns them both. Oscar's defense often turns into attack, and at times he can wound, landing heavier blows on his son, sometimes when the son least expects them. It falls to Alan to see and control the whole situation, so that the tension of the argument keeps the film moving, and, when the moment comes, to allow or even help his father land those punches.

This is the great challenge of the self-reflexive authorial documentary: throughout the creative process the director must also regard himself as a character in the film, while meeting the artistic aims set by the *director* and the dramaturgical demands that serve them.

> "I'll never forget the first time I put words and expressions with emotional power like "Don't push me" or "You keep on hounding me and pounding me" over the boxing footage. It was amazing to see how their meanings would shift when juxtaposed against such rugged physical imagery. In an attempt to be fair to my father—after all. I'm the filmmaker, and I have all the power as editor of the film—I made it a point to include several of his verbal put-downs and admonishments of me over the boxing footage. For instance, when I asked him about his divorce from my mother, Regina, something he did not want to talk about, he declared that it showed my "lack of understanding … lack of sympathy … lack of empathy … lack of feeling …" for what this meant to him. Those words hurt me, but I included them so he too could land some punches. (…) I suppose the boxing metaphor finds its final poetic poignancy in the idea that my father

> is "the champion," because throughout the film, I am indeed very much "the challenger." [87]

Before going further, it is worth recalling a journal entry that sets out several theses and intentions for the work in progress. In it Alan noted the thematic and emotional cornerstones of the film's structure: a kind of director's statement of intent.

> These will be the keys to the structure of the film:
>
> a son making a film about his father
>
> a son confronting his father
>
> a son reconciling with his father
>
> a son daring his father to be/to become
>
> a son giving his father the greatest gift he knows
>
> a son and father matching wits
>
> a son and father fighting
>
> a son and father loving [88]

These sentences make clear what is in any case beyond doubt: despite the oppositions, tensions and enormous differences, this is an exceptionally close father–son relationship, and it is the foundation of the film. The resistance of Oscar, now in his late seventies, his cantankerous fault-finding, his paternal lecturing and his occasionally cynical remarks all belong to the character the film sets out to portray, and that the director clearly wants to show. It is precisely because of his son's directorial choices that Oscar Berliner becomes a lovable figure, one whose cynicism the viewer is at times even glad to share. Alan obviously knows his father's character inside out, and knows how to draw him into the situation the film requires at any given moment. This applies not only to the shooting but to the entire creative process, including the editing that gives the work its final form. With a film made from such tangled and extremely heterogeneous material, it is difficult, almost impossible, for the subject, here Oscar, to imagine the finished film from the shoot and to picture himself in it.

At the beginning of the film, over the titles, Oscar in effect acknowledges the director's authority: Alan, you're going to do what you want anyway, whether I want it or not. With this gesture he essentially accepts, and consents to, whatever will happen in the film.

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[87]Berliner, A. (2012). "Editing the Self." In G. Oldham, *First Cut 2: More Conversations with Film Editors*, pp. 149–173. University of California Press.
[88]Alan Berliner, *Nobody's Business*: selected journal entries, 1995, 1996 and 2001.



"And ironically, my father's participation in the film became reminiscent of an old program if you will, that we used to have, where he used to help me with my homework when I was in 5th grade or 6th grade in elementary school. It was as if, however 30 some odd years later he was in a position to help me with my homework again. To that extent we became partners in this film. To say I couldn't have made the film without him is obvious, but it was his participation and his… In a way, the film was his gift to me. In a way beyond that, the film was a mutual gift giving; it was my gift to him as much as his gift to me." [89]

Although the backbone of the film is the conversation, the verbal duel, between Oscar and Alan Berliner, this is not a conventional interview situation.

In these conversations a uniform black background is visible behind Oscar and behind every other person who appears; no other element of the setting, such as furniture or shelves, is in the frame. We are in a studio-like, abstracting space that lifts the subject out of "real" space and time: we cannot tell the season, the time of day or the hour. The face is usually framed in a tight close-up, which makes lighting practically unavoidable. Excluding real time and space helps the director create the film's own space and time, in which, visually, only the face matters. Depending on taste and imagination, the viewer may think of this place as an imaginary projection space in which a strange journey through time and a timeless verbal duel are taking place. Oscar's presence is continuous and intense; the viewer feels as though sitting there with him and the director. In this interview setting Oscar Berliner appears on screen twelve times in all, in stretches of two to thirty-three seconds, for a total of two and a half minutes. That is enough for us to feel the protagonist's presence through most of the film, since the conversation and the argument keep turning, regardless of how many times, and when, it was actually recorded. Oscar believed he was taking part in a biographical film about himself, and in part that is true.



[89] PBS/POV, interview with Alan Berliner, June 3, 1997.

A STRUCTURAL OVERVIEW OF THE FILM, AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

If we regard the work as a biographically based film essay, we can divide it into the following chapters:

Prologue

—Oscar's childhood and youth. (A brief history of the Berliner family, reaching back to the Central European forebears, up to the meeting of Oscar and Regina Cassuto.)

—The meeting and marriage of Oscar and Regina, up to the divorce.

—Oscar's old age, up to the present of the film.

Epilogue

Formally, these stages of life, these chapters, are not separated from one another in the film at all; the storytelling moves delicately from one to the next.

Oscar, born in America, never considered it truly important to learn the history of the grandparents and more distant ancestors who had remained in Central Europe, and in this he is far from alone among the children and grandchildren of immigrants. For Alan, by contrast, identity and belonging to a family are fundamental questions and a substantial part of nearly all his films.

As a first step in uncovering the family history, the director questions eight first cousins, but all they know is that the family came from somewhere in Russia or Poland; none of them could point to the place on a map. This interview montage, not without humor, introduces the more distant relatives who reappear later in the film, each contributing a sentence or a thought to the portrait of Oscar, and at the same time sets up the scene that follows.

For his research Alan travels to Salt Lake City, where, in a nuclear-bomb-proof vault deep inside the surrounding granite mountains, the Family History Library stores, on microfilm and other media, records of two billion people going back five hundred years: birth, marriage and death certificates, Social Security records, naturalization and census records and so on. The director carries out exhaustive research and manages to trace the history of the Berliner family with astonishing precision and detail.

The research process, together with the library and its objects, becomes part of the storytelling and a vehicle for it. This strangely atmospheric place, with its cold, modern orderliness, also evokes mortality. The film first shows, in stop-motion, the distinctive neon-lit space where the drawers of floor-to-ceiling catalog cabinets slide open, crammed with data on countless human lives. Then the microfilm reader helps uncover and evoke a forgotten piece of the past, beginning with the story of the director's great-grandparents. These reels, and those relating to the lives of his grandfather and of Oscar, become part of the film in a very varied and exciting visual form. How is this done?

The crank of a microfilm reader sets things in motion, and the documents appear from film unwinding off a spool. The microfilm images move across the screen rapidly and

dynamically, horizontally and vertically (and, more rarely, diagonally): words, sentence fragments, names, signatures and fragments of records rush past, but one key word or another is always legible and registers with the viewer. The movement is generally produced by cutting or dissolving every two to four frames, and it stops on a legible freeze-frame wherever the dramaturgy requires, sometimes completing or reinforcing the spoken information. However self-evident and simple the presentation of these microfilm reels may seem, it is far more complex, both in its making and in the way it works on the viewer.

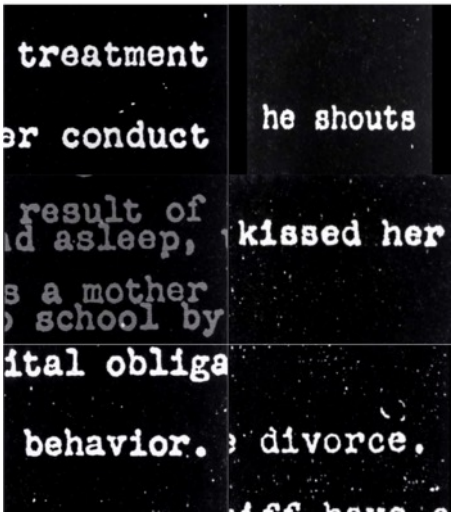
They lend the film a lively visual momentum: we are recalling, researching, investigating, as information reels past before our eyes.

The moving black-and-white documents are astonishingly varied in imagery, typography and graphic character; they include printed and handwritten passages in English, Russian and Hebrew, maps and so on. The result is an experimental treatment of documentary imagery through animation, a defining stylistic element that is at the same time a kind of visual poetry within the film. Similar animation is also used to present documents unrelated to the microfilms.

The words that surface and vanish in this movement affect the viewer's perception even when detached from their sentences, and they awaken associations. This is the device through which the scene of the parents' divorce is rendered on screen. First an enlarged *him* and *her* appear alternately on screen, in time with the metronome; then we see the director at the microfilm reader, and the viewer is shown fragments of the archived divorce court record: words, numbers, fragments of testimony, adjectives, facts, a date. They are the splinters of a broken marriage, which never add up to meaningful sentences, because the children cannot make sense of them. These words might just as well be the fragments of sentences parents hurl at each other while quarreling behind a closed door.



Then a single word appears and stops relentlessly on screen, irrevocable, followed by a period: *divorce*. The end. It is followed by a powerful, suggestive, dramatic archival image of a house swept away by a hurricane and tumbling into a river.



Alan masterfully conveys, through the devices of film language, what this divorce meant to him. Here the microfilm animation takes on a dramatic meaning: the words and sentence fragments surfacing and vanishing before our eyes are amplified by the cinematic context of the entire divorce sequence and affect the viewer indirectly, through association. For Alan his parents' divorce was an enormous trauma; for Oscar it was the greatest disappointment and most painful event of his life. It is no accident, then, that the film's

strongest emotional moment is perhaps found here. Alan spoke about this in an interview I conducted with him. There is an image in *Nobody's Business*, he said, of a house collapsing into water: it comes apart and falls in. He uses it during the rather delicate conversation with his father about the divorce, about the fact that this was truly the most disappointing, the most disturbing, the most traumatic moment in the lives of them both. He had found the image of the collapsing house, of course, in an industrial film about hurricanes: it shows the rubble and debris left behind by the storm as it razes the house to the ground, after which it tumbles into the flooding river. And the use of this image—the image of the house, taken entirely out of the hurricane's context—carries meaning on a number of levels: it is his house, the place where he lived; it is one white house among countless other houses, and yet it is this one that collapses into the river. It is his house, his family, the dissolution of his family, if you like. It is deeply symbolic of his parents' divorce, but it also leads on to divorce in general: the house and its collapse symbolize every family in which the parents have divorced. That image is therefore his and also yours; he is in it and you are in it. He would like to think that he brings similar images to the surface in his work, in one way or another.[90]

This example shows, I think, how a given cinematic form of expression, developed and tested in Alan's cinematic laboratory, can be used in many different ways at different points in the storytelling, in the service of the appropriate dramaturgical aims.

A functionally and formally very similar variant of the microfilm animation is the photo animation. The scene is set in motion by a film spool (the same image we see in the microfilm scenes), followed by an animation assembled from some sixty family photographs, most of them two frames long, following one another in rapid dissolves. The five-second sequence evokes Oscar's childhood through photographs of him, his siblings and his parents.[91]

Another variant appears in the film: an animation made by similar technical means, but whose raw material is not still images but the family Super 8 footage shot by Oscar Berliner.[92] It is made from thirty-five pieces of film, four or five frames long,[93] cut hard against one another. On the soundtrack a fast-rewind effect accompanies the sequence, which precedes the verbal battle, the "boxing" scene, over the divorce.

A few words are in order here about the Super 8 footage in the family archive. These films span many years in the life of the family and their friends, recording its happy moments. Nothing but brightness and sunshine; the parents play with the children and are visibly happy. A beautiful young woman, a handsome man, lots of travel, many friends. Oscar Berliner appears in many of these shots, of which he could at most have been the "director," not the cameraman. Gradually, as the marriage deteriorated, the filming stopped as well, so that Alan appears in the Super 8 footage only as a little boy.

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[90]From the author's interview with Alan Berliner, New York (Tribeca), February 20, 2016. The interview was conducted in English; as the original wording was not available for this translation, the passage is rendered in indirect speech rather than as direct quotation.

[91]*Nobody's Business*: 13'22"–13'27".

[92]*Nobody's Business*: 29'56"–30'18".

[93]The last two shots are longer.

Renov observes that this family footage is to some extent false, since it privileges form over content, gesture over true and nuanced experience; and he adds that home movies, like every form of documentation, have always been better suited to capturing the surface than to revealing the depths. Once the facts have been established, the conflicts and tensions beneath that untroubled surface, reflected in faded images of well-behaved children and wives with perfect hair smiling for the camera, can begin to be uncovered.[94]



In the film Alan puts the question to Oscar:

> "Why did you take all of those 8mm home movies?" [95]

He never received an answer, either in the film or later.[96] Oscar did not even want to see this footage during the shoot; perhaps it would have been too painful. Fortunately, however, these films survived the storms of the divorce as a "time capsule," to be reborn in this work. Alan's parents on their early dates, as if in a 1950s feature film: an elegant, light-colored car rolls slowly and majestically into frame, the sun flashing blindingly off its chrome; Oscar, behind the wheel, arrives for the date and honks the horn; a very pretty young woman steps out of the door: Regina Cassuto. The energetic, happy couple with their children, in idealized and slightly overexposed amateur footage, set up the dramatic divorce scene extremely well.

> "In Nobody's Business, the secret harbored beneath the surface of the happy family footage is the reality of divorce as a terrible destructive force. One of the film's particularly effective visual metaphors occurs during Oscar's reluctant account of the divorce when Alan cuts away to stock footage of a home, perilously perched at the edge of a cliff, tumbling into the sea. But there are other secrets as well. The work of the film is to put on display for us the viewers a very particular sort of father/son dialogue, one that whittles away at the silence that enshrouds the past." [97]

Alan Berliner's films raise questions about the essential matters of human existence (family, love, identity, memory and history, in all their complex interrelations) sensitively, authentically and in a form the viewer can experience. *Nobody's Business*, thanks to its honesty, its humor, its fresh and boldly innovative storytelling and its professional mastery,

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[94]Michael Renov, "Family Secrets: Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* and the (American) Jewish Autobiographical Film," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 49, no. 1 (2008): 55–65. Rendered in indirect speech; the original English was not available for this translation.

[95]*Nobody's Business* (1996), dialogue transcript.

[96]One month after the birth of his son Eli, Alan Berliner gave a lecture at New York University entitled "Like My Father Before Me," in which he also spoke on this subject.

[97]Michael Renov, "Family Secrets: Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* and the (American) Jewish Autobiographical Film," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 49, no. 1 (2008): 55–65.

can be understood and felt by audiences from the most diverse cultures, while at the same time being deeply rooted in Jewish identity. It is therefore important to examine the film from this perspective as well.

Discussing the boxing scenes in relation to the film's Jewish roots, Michael Renov makes an interesting and important point:

> "But there is more to be said about the "Jewishness" of these recent first- person documentaries. For the most part, these are films willing to "struggle with the fathers." I love the choice of archival boxing footage in Nobody's Business, offering as it does the ideal visualization of the give-and-take between father and son, the face-off between the irresistible force and the immovable object. Alan and Oscar are shown to be as alike as the two combatants in the ring, distinguishable only by the color of their trunks, flailing away at each other, taking turns sending one another to the canvas. Yet this pitched battle between father and son always makes me smile because I know it is grounded in deep affection and an awareness of their core connectedness. As for the Jewishness of such encounters, I can't help but think of another mano-a-mano encounter, the one we read about in Genesis between Jacob and the angel on the eve of Jacob's reunion with his brother Esau." [98]

The passage from Genesis:

> And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. [99]

It is here that Jacob receives his new name, and from this point on he is Israel:

> Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed. [100]

Renov continues: this struggle is a defining moment in the history of his people. To this day they are the children of Israel, those bold enough to wrestle even with their angels. His people do not accept the world as it is; they struggle with the divine and the human alike, wounds notwithstanding, and that combativeness played a crucial part in survival in the Diaspora. This tug-of-war with Oscar tests Alan; the sensitivities and obsessions of father and son collide, but Alan emerges from the struggle with a better understanding of the Berliner family's dynamics, and of himself. What we witness between father and son is a loving but unsparing fight.[101]

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[98]Michael Renov, "Family Secrets: Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* and the (American) Jewish Autobiographical Film," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 49, no. 1 (2008): 55–65.

[99]Genesis 32:25–27. The dissertation quotes the Hungarian text of *Biblia*, vol. I, Makkabi, 1994, ed. Tamás Raj, p. 116.

[100]Genesis 32:29. The dissertation quotes the Hungarian text of *Biblia*, vol. I, Makkabi, 1994, ed. Tamás Raj, p. 116.

[101]Michael Renov, "Family Secrets: Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* and the (American) Jewish Autobiographical Film," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 49, no. 1 (2008): 55–65. Rendered in indirect speech; the original English was not available for this translation.

"Something new is forged in its place amidst all the sparring—a special connection that binds all combatants." [102]



Alan Berliner filming in Treblinka (Photo: Frida Sterenberg)

A defining point of departure in Alan's work is a sense of Jewish identity and belonging, emphasized not necessarily in religious terms but in terms of identity: the experience of belonging, through intellectual and cultural traditions, to a community, to the immediate and extended family, and to a shared, all-embracing history. It is also the task of cinematic memory to preserve, evoke and pass on this knowledge. It is unacceptable to him that anyone, out of selfishness or indifference, at an ocean's remove, should ignore the tragedy of the Holocaust or turn away from its six million victims, among them the members of the Berliner family who had remained in Central and Eastern Europe.

In each of the film's three chapters, Jewish identity also appears as a theme, in different forms, through the family history: in relation to tradition, identity and history. In the first chapter Alan tries to take his father on a "journey" into the distant past, into the nineteenth century, so that Oscar too might discover a part of the family history in which he had shown little interest during his life. Alan's open intention was to jolt his father out of the indifference that had walled him in during the decades since the divorce. Although Oscar raised Alan as a Jewish father (and, it should be added, as an excellent father, as even his former wife, Regina, acknowledged), for him the immediate family mattered more than anything; his extended family and its history did not really interest him. Oscar was born and raised in a Central European Jewish immigrant family and, as a second-generation American, chose the path of assimilation. He therefore attached no importance to the history of his European ancestors and saw no point in its appearing in a film about him. He felt obliged to warn the director, his son, that if he wanted to talk in the film about people the audience had never known and had no interest in, it would be a sure failure.



Oscar and Alan Berliner in the synagogue at Alan's bar mitzvah

The evocation of the family past begins with an old record and its beautiful, sentimental music; archival footage and a Hebrew text run through the microfilm reader, followed by a

[102]Michael Renov, "Family Secrets: Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* and the (American) Jewish Autobiographical Film," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 49, no. 1 (2008): 55–65.

postmark from Rajgród dated April 25, 1897 (!). In response to his father's warnings that the film will fail, Alan reads aloud a letter written in Yiddish by his great-grandfather Solomon to Benjamin Berliner. Alan begins the scene by slowly turning the crank of the microfilm reader, matching it to the movement of a ship crossing the ocean. The microfilm reader, as a device for "calling up the story," recurs as a motif several times in the film with this kind of match cut on movement.

In black-and-white archival footage we see the Jewish community of a small town or village in Central and Eastern Europe: streets of the period, a *cheder*, faces of children and old people, poverty. The moving letter reaches beyond the personal: it is an important historical document of the era of emigration, expressing the lived experience of a great many Central and Eastern European Jewish families. Alan masterfully portrays an entire era through his own family history. These few lines express the pain of those left behind and the hopes of the nearly two million Jews who, like Benjamin Berliner, crossed the ocean in search of safety and a livelihood in the New World. Alan regards individual fate as the part of history that can be worked through personally: family, near and distant, is part of a shared Jewish history to which he feels deeply bound, and whose key is the preservation of identity through active remembrance. For him, active remembrance is the film and the creative process behind it, and perhaps even its distribution, so that the work may become part of collective memory.

The film's second chapter is the story of the family: the marriage, and the breakup, of Oscar and Regina, two people from entirely different family and cultural backgrounds. Oscar Berliner, a second-generation American and the son of Ashkenazi immigrants, is some twelve or thirteen years older than Regina Cassuto, a first-generation immigrant from a wealthy Sephardic family with ambitions as an actress. Joseph Cassuto was probably impressed by the confident, handsome young entrepreneur who was already established, and so gave his consent to the marriage.

Alan opens this chapter by recalling a photograph seen at the start of the film, Oscar with a microphone in his hand, and asks his father to sing. Oscar begins Doris Day's "Sentimental Journey," the great hit of his youth.[103] That is Oscar's musical entrance. Soon another song follows, introducing Regina: Edith Piaf's "Non, je ne regrette rien."

Alan sketches their differences delicately, through mood, and then each says what they saw in the other before they married. Perhaps here, in his imagination, Alan would reunite the family, an idea framed metaphorically by a song sung separately and together, "The Nearness of You". The duet was recorded by Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong after the wedding, at roughly the time Alan was born.

Berliner, as Renov puts it, unites his parents by "magic," showing his father singing "The Nearness of You" and intercutting this with footage of his mother performing the same song. Through the magical duet, the house tumbling into the water and the boxing

[103]"Sentimental Journey," a popular song of 1944, music by Les Brown and Ben Homer, lyrics by Bud Green, performed by Doris Day. It topped the charts in 1945, appearing by chance just as the Second World War was ending.

scene, the director asks the viewer to imagine what his parents' divorce must have been like for him. These feelings cannot be expressed directly in images or words. Instead the director cuts in sounds and images, drawing on a cinematic repertoire of sounds and images, that both illustrate and dismantle the continuum of space and time the images might originally have represented. Symbolically, they express instead a deeper and broader reality that is far harder to depict.

In the third chapter we arrive at the present, and for the first time we see Oscar in his own surroundings, in the retirement home. The present-day scenes of this section, and those in Poland, were shot by Alan himself, sensitively and empathetically, on 16mm. In a two-and-a-half-minute montage of forty-eight shots, the director portrays his father's daily life in beautifully composed, emotionally rich images of old age and solitude. Yet at the end of the scene a reproachful question jolts us back, and we are at the boxing match again. Some people say you never tried to change, that you could have done something to make things turn out better, Alan says accusingly. After a brief exchange of blows we arrive at the chapter's central theme: the question of the extended, distant family, which ultimately leads to important questions about Jewish identity and cultural and historical community.

Alan invites second and third cousins to join the conversation about what kinship at this remove actually means. We are relatives and strangers at the same time, comes the answer; typically, if we met in the street, I would have no idea who you are. But then, as they reflect further on the extended family, very important things are said: we are strangers who share a common history; it is from these people that I received my culture; our parents and grandparents had the same experiences.

Meanwhile we again see the Jewish community of the small Polish village from which the Berliner family and all the second and third cousins come, and about which none of them really knows anything anymore. At the same time, metaphorically, the distant family means not merely the actual Polish ancestors but Jewishness itself: its shared history, culture and tradition, and its vast store of common experience.

Oscar did not want to take part in getting in touch with the second and third cousins, since he believes he is related to them purely by accident of birth. He has nothing to do with them, then. Nothing. Only close relatives count. In practice, Oscar sees distant relatives only at funerals.

One of the most important parts of the chapter is the scene about the Holocaust. Alan traveled to Poland in search of the memory and graves of the Berliner family, but where the cemetery had been he found a neglected, overgrown plot where only shattered stones marked the traces of the former graves.





We are back in the conversation with his father, while on screen we see the remains of the former Jewish cemetery.

Alan: I couldn't find their graves.

Oscar: I told you, I told you you were only wasting your time.

Alan: Look what has become of the Jewish cemeteries—there are many Jewish cemeteries in Eastern Europe like this one.

Oscar: Alan, people live, they die and they are buried. What the hell are we trying to prove with this?

This footage stirs no emotion whatsoever in Oscar.

Jason Silverman wrote in *The Austin Chronicle* that in researching the family past Alan travels through Eastern Europe (Oscar's parents were Polish immigrants), but that this too fails to move Oscar. There was this one gravestone standing alone, Alan tells his father on his return, and I decided to choose it as your grandfather's gravestone. Well, then, you should be happy now, Oscar says, bored. By his own account, Berliner was surprised by his father's stubborn indifference. Oscar's story is a common one: after arriving in America, his parents wanted above all to fit in, and neglected to cultivate and document the family past. For Oscar and his family, their origins were a handicap. For Alan, by contrast, who grew up in an unremarkable, conventional environment, they matter a great deal. The immigrants all wanted a new life, a fresh start, Alan says. His father's generation wanted to lose the Yiddish accent. He wanted to be a good baseball player, to forget the old stories. He wanted to be an American.[104]

Alan: Have you ever thought about any of our unknown relatives who died in the Holocaust?

Oscar: Not on a personal or a family level.

Alan: Your father had brothers and sisters who never came to this country, and they had families who almost certainly died in the Holocaust.

Oscar: I don't know that.

[104]Jason Silverman, "Family Matters—The Texas Documentary Tour: Alan Berliner," *The Austin Chronicle*, January 9, 1998.





Alan: I'm telling you, it's certain.

Oscar: I feel for them, but beyond that, nothing.

Over the dialogue we see a painfully sad, elegiac image in the slow, soundless rhythm of remembrance: we are sitting on a train somewhere in Poland, heading into nowhere; beside a pair of rails vanishing into the fog, telegraph poles file slowly past, and a quiet choir is heard in the distance.

Then a crowded cemetery, its graves like a sea of stone. The sequence is a painful evocation of the Holocaust; emotionally, it both completes and heightens the tension of the dialogue we hear. For the train we are on is moving in a set direction we do not know, toward something we do not know. Only this movement exists; if we turn our heads away or close our eyes, the train travels on regardless, with us on it, and we keep receding from the landscape we see.

Oscar does not want to know about these things; it is too late now. He is too old to change so late in life, he says. He no longer feels that death is very far away, and remarks without any theatricality that we cannot live forever. His granddaughter Jade, though, brings him great joy.

In the chapter's closing scene we are back at the Family History Library. Here the motif of mortality and death, earlier only hinted at by the strange atmosphere of the place, unfolds fully in image and mood.

The camera tilts slowly down the granite mountain to the entrance leading into its depths, protected by an enormous, thick armored door. Passing slowly through the door, we advance in a long, slow tracking shot along the narrow corridor between floor-to-ceiling cabinets; then, with the movement of film unwinding from a spool, we return to the same corridor and travel faster, and then faster still, toward a black iron door, into which we almost crash. The screen goes dark.

THE RECEPTION OF THE FILM



The world premiere of *Nobody's Business* took place, to great acclaim, at the highly prestigious New York Film Festival, in Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center.

> I was not the only one in tears when my father received a standing ovation after the premiere of *Nobody's Business* in Alice Tully Hall—he stood like a startled deer in the flood of affection poured over him by the applause of eleven hundred strangers. It was perhaps the most emotional moment of my life, and although he never told me so himself—I had to learn it from someone else weeks later—it was the happiest evening of his, too. [105]

The *New York Times* praised the film in two long articles, and it soon began its journey around the world.

The European premiere took place at the Berlinale, in the Forum section founded by Ulrich Gregor, where Alan Berliner became a regular guest with his films; there it won the FIPRESCI Prize and the section's most prestigious award, the Caligari Film Prize. In addition to thirteen major prizes, among them the top awards at Nyon and Jerusalem, the film also won an Emmy in 1998. Its national television premiere in the United States took place on June 3, 1997, on PBS, America's public broadcasting service, where the broadcast was accompanied by an interview with the filmmaker conducted by Lisa Heller, who later became executive producer of *First Cousin Once Removed* for HBO. The film reached audiences worldwide on various television channels, and in Europe and Japan a 35mm blow-up was released theatrically.

Oscar Berliner spent his last years in the retirement home, under the constant care of Alan and Lynn. Television crews visited him from time to time. His health steadily declined and his dementia worsened.



"In all the years following Nobody's Business, he claimed he would never get a swell head from all the attention he received, if only because after all his brain operations, there wasn't anything left to get swollen. Later on after his dementia set in, I used to love it when he'd introduce himself to other patients in the nursing home as a movie star. Of course, he could never hear their incredulous responses, but he did see their smiles.

[105] Alan Berliner, eulogy for Oscar Berliner, delivered at the Riverside Memorial Chapel, New York City, August 22, 2001. The passage is rendered here in the author's translation from the Hungarian, the original English not being available.

> And though I must have told him a thousand times, he never connected with -- or appreciated -- the fact that people all over the world always ask about him, some of them claiming that he's a little bit a father to everyone who's had a chance to see the film." [106]

Oscar Berliner died on August 19, 2001. His funeral was held at Riverside Memorial Chapel, where his son Alan delivered the eulogy. Alan said goodbye to him; but through the film Oscar Berliner triumphed over transience, and with *Nobody's Business* he remains with the family and with the audience, with us. His grandson Eli, who never had the chance to meet Oscar, can come to know his grandfather and his grandfather's family through the film, and much else besides. I believe Alan kept the promise he made to himself while making the film: *a son giving his father the greatest gift he knows*. Yes: love, recompense, and, through the film, eternity.

After his father's death Alan Berliner wrote in his journal:

> "His death now changes the life of the film. Gives it more edge. Releases me to move on. To make a new calibration of my past, present, and future. Puts me at a crossroads. New directions in life. In work. In love. All of my equations are now open-ended. "Oscar Berliner & Son" is now closed for business. We've retired. He's moved out, I'm moving on. Like everything else about him, it's a sad, mélange of ironies and contradictions. But I loved him out loud and people heard, understood, respected, and seemingly -- in turn, found a way to love him too. We learn from the lessons we live. We live from the lessons we learn." [107]

[106] Alan Berliner, eulogy for Oscar Berliner, delivered at the Riverside Memorial Chapel, New York City, August 22, 2001.
[107] Alan Berliner, *Nobody's Business*: selected journal entries, 2001.

VII

WIDE AWAKE: FICTIONAL ELEMENTS IN THE PERSONAL, AUTHORIAL DOCUMENTARY

ANTECEDENTS AND MOTIVATIONS

From *Nobody's Business* we learned how traumatic his parents' divorce was for Alan, as were the endless nighttime quarrels that preceded it, which he often listened to from beginning to end, creeping up to the door. After years of sleepless nights he was never again able to sleep properly, and in adulthood the sleep disorder became chronic. This far from natural condition caused him a great deal of difficulty, and he had suffered from it for decades before making the film.



In an old black-and-white recording, which opens with the words "October 25, 1989, about 3:25 in the morning," Alan says that he is always very tired: when people ask how he is, he answers that he is tired, and they reply that for as long as they have known him he has always said the same thing. By morning his eyes are bloodshot, his voice dull, his words labored, and his thoughts, if one can speak of them in the plural at all, considerably slowed.[108]

Although over the decades he tried various remedies for his insomnia, from hot baths, hypnosis and yoga to marijuana and a range of medications, he did not want to seek medical help. He accepted the condition and learned to live with it. Then, as a creative artist, he arranged his life so as to turn the disorder to his advantage: he worked on his films until dawn, taking advantage of the calm of the night and finding refuge and inspiration in it.

What artistic intentions and personal motivations, then, led Alan to decide in 2004 to make a film looking behind the shadows cast by his sleep problems? What might such a film be about? To what extent could he work through a serious problem in his own life in a way that would reach large audiences with a complex and, not least, highly entertaining work of art, holding up a mirror to many viewers and making them think?

As we have seen, Alan, as a maker of personal films, has often felt at a particular point in his life that the time had come to take up a subject that had long preoccupied him,

[108]From *Wide Awake*, quoted in the dissertation from the HBO Hungarian dubbed version (Hungarian text: János Lajos Szabó); the English is retranslated from the dub and paraphrases the passage rather than reproducing the original soundtrack verbatim.

whether the story of his maternal grandfather Joseph Cassuto, his relationship with his father Oscar Berliner, or his parents' divorce.

In the case of *Wide Awake*, Alan himself cannot offer a definitive explanation:



> "Why I was finally willing to risk revealing some of the conflicts and contradictions that have shaped my life for so long. Why I felt strong enough to admit that the very condition that prevents me from sleeping, and separates me from my family, provides the fuel for my creative life at night, but also leaves me exhausted during the day. For someone who prides himself on being able to explain things, why I made WIDE AWAKE at this moment in my life still remains a mystery." [109]

Nevertheless, important changes and events in Alan's life may have served as concrete antecedents to the making of the film:

> "Maybe it had to do with the death of my father back on August 19th, 2001. Maybe it had to do with the shocking events (just three weeks later) of September 11th, 2001. (I live less than one kilometer from ground zero. The sound of the first crash woke me from a deep sleep. The second crash made me remember the first crash, which made me realize I wasn't dreaming, which made me turn on the radio, which made me realize that life would never be the same.) Less than an hour later, when I got dressed and went out on the street, I witnessed the towers tumble to the ground with my own eyes. Two events shook my soul, all within a period of three weeks." [110]

He adds that it may also have had to do with his divorce, with his marriage to Shari, and with the arrival of their son, Eli. One of his motives for making the film may have been precisely the wish to free himself from his anxieties; at the same time, in a bold decision, Alan approached the film from an entirely unfamiliar direction, following an inner artistic compulsion:

> "Maybe I wanted to go to a place in my life and in my work that really scared me. This is probably a healthy instinct for artists to have at some point in their lives. But it also takes a little bit of recklessness, some foolishness, and a lot of blind faith to enter the dark forest of your fears." [111]

In this film, anxiety and fear are countered by multilayered, subtle verbal and visual humor, and by a complex form of personal authorial presence that further widens the boundaries of the personal documentary, if such boundaries exist at all. Let us say it plainly: one of the unusual and refreshing novelties of this work within the genre, at least from a Hungarian perspective, is Alan's performance in the very complex role he has created for himself. *Wide Awake* is a genuine New York film, at times evoking the world of Woody Allen without borrowing from it. At the same time it is an essay film rich in visual and sonic

[109] Alan Berliner, director's statement, catalogue essay, International Forum of New Cinema, Berlin International Film Festival, 2006.
[110] Alan Berliner, director's statement, catalogue essay, International Forum of New Cinema, Berlin International Film Festival, 2006.
[111] Alan Berliner, director's statement, catalogue essay, International Forum of New Cinema, Berlin International Film Festival, 2006.

metaphors and in associations, at times moving at a dizzying pace, in Berliner's distinctive style, and often drawing on fictional and narrative elements and scenes. In some sequences Alan and his wife Shari appear in moments of great personal intimacy, and in a few scenes the family (Alan, Shari and Regina, along with Lynn Berliner) appears with remarkable openness and candor, but always within a carefully conceived and constructed cinematic framework.

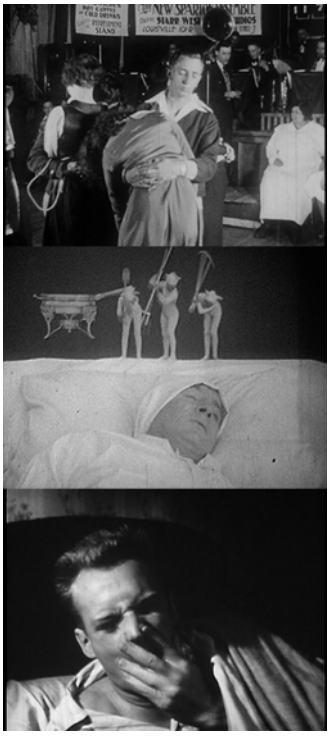
Although the film is about insomnia, another important and exciting layer also emerges, through a self-reflexive dimension that runs subtly through the whole film: the filmmaker and the creative process itself. *Wide Awake* is also about filmmaking and the creative process; and as an essay film that uses fictional methods self-reflexively, yet boldly and with complete naturalness, it opens a new dimension in Berliner's approach to storytelling.

Work on the film began in early 2004 and took nearly two years; for the first time, HBO provided the funding. The making of *Wide Awake* was preceded by extensive research.

SELF-REFLECTION AND ROLES

Alan also developed the subject thematically in considerable detail, and elements of this work appear in the film in self-reflexive form, a point to which we will return. For the film he naturally gathered a wide range of archival material, from fiction films to newsreels.

In researching the archival material, Alan was guided by the following aim:



In making *Wide Awake*, he told me, he was looking for archival material he could work with: images of people sleeping, of people tossing and turning sleeplessly in bed, and everything in between. And he found such images, anonymous archival footage of people tossing and turning from countless films, much of which is in the film. These images function as projections in two ways. They stand in for him; they are his analogues: he is in them, unable to sleep, and he uses those people as projections of his own insomnia, his own nights of tossing and turning. At the same time, in their anonymity and their multiple valences, these images allow viewers to see their own sleep disorders, their own sleeplessness, their own nighttime torment in them. They work on two levels: as a projection of himself, a window onto his own experience, and potentially as a mirror for every viewer, since they are anonymous archival material. They function simultaneously as window and mirror, opening up space for metaphor.[112]

In preparing *Wide Awake*, Alan also sought out some of North America's leading sleep specialists, who play an important role in the film; his doctor–patient conversations with

[112]From the author's interview with Alan Berliner, New York (Tribeca), February 20, 2016. The interview was conducted in English; as the original wording was not available for this translation, the passage is rendered in indirect speech rather than as direct quotation.

them become, in part, the driving force of the storytelling. Clearly, what was at stake here was not merely recording a documentary situation with two cameras: the specialists also had to remain convincing on camera while playing their real-life roles as physicians. Related to these scenes, and complementing them, are Alan's sleep study and the situations and visual elements associated with it (various diagrams, an EEG trace and so on), which provide excellent visual and dramaturgical transitions to the next scene.



The opening scenes with the sleep specialists give the viewer a concise, dynamic and informative account of Alan's current situation: his marital status, his age, his impending fatherhood, his complaints, his habits and so on. Meanwhile, in his brief answers to the questions of five different doctors, the director establishes the distinctive performance style and repertoire of gestures for this type of scene, which he maintains throughout the film and which differs both from that of the director in the studio and from that of the Alan at the family dinner. The conversations with the doctors were clearly filmed within a prearranged framework. They serve the storytelling on many levels: they are informative, interesting, at times humorous, and above all rooted in specific dramatic situations. But they are clearly constructed situations.

Alan, for instance, tells one of the doctors a story that is also illustrated on screen. *Nobody's Business* was being screened at a university. After several sleepless days he boarded a plane, exhausted, worried that his fatigue would keep him from doing well in front of the students. But when he arrived, he complains to the doctor, only a handful of people were sitting in the audience, though it was a good-sized hall. That's funny, the sleep specialist remarks. I don't know whether it's the same at doctors' lectures, Alan goes on, but for an independent filmmaker it's part of life. Then, in the scene he recalls, he turns to the audience before the screening: would anyone mind if he filmed the audience from the side or the back of the hall, in the dark? No objections? All right, thanks. And we see students asleep during the screening. For some reason he had decided to bring his little infrared camera, the one that can film in the dark, Alan continues, and he soon noticed that five or six people in the audience had nodded off. They were literally asleep. The doctor reassures him with a scientific explanation: in today's society the most sleep-deprived people are college students; they sleep so little that they are constantly tired and drowsy to begin with.

The scene works through its subtle self-irony, in the way Alan brings up this story in connection with insomnia, and this kind of humor appears frequently in the doctor–patient scenes.

The other type of scene, which recurs several times in the film, is the conversation at the family dinner table between Alan, his mother Regina, his sister Lynn and his wife. Here too the camera demands of the participants a presence and naturalness that must be convincing as performance. Here Alan, citing the doctors, raises the subject of his parents' quarrels in connection with his sleep disorder.

> Alan: Several doctors have said that the reason I'm not a good sleeper may also be connected to the fact that as a kid I was often up at night and heard the two of you fighting, and that it got embedded that deep in my memory, as a kind of pain. […]
>
> Regina: When you were eight or nine we hardly fought at all.
>
> Lynn: Mother, what are you saying?
>
> Alan: Of course we did—when I was two, three, four, five, six, seven. Only us? The historical memories are coming out, aren't they?
>
> Lynn: You think that's why you couldn't fall asleep?
>
> Alan: It may be. Once I worked out what was actually going on between you two, I chewed on it constantly. That's why I stayed up, so I could hear you, watch you. I heard everything. It was the great experience of my life, eavesdropping while the two of you fought. When you were alone together, and in wider family settings—at parties, say.

These childhood memories and traumas affected Alan's adult life as well. This is also why he wants to be a perfect father and give Eli everything: calm, love, security and plenty of good sleep. His overzealousness becomes the other subject of the dinner-table conversation. His mother takes a dim view of Alan's obsession, and at the end of the film tells him theatrically to finish this film at last and find another subject, because it is partly this film, not Eli, that has worn her out.

Toward the end of the film, then, someone says aloud that the film ought to be finished. This, too, is a reflection on the creative process, and a slightly self-ironic one.

The most difficult performance challenge the director set himself, and, let us add at once, one he met superbly.

Alan appears in the film in two kinds of roles, each with several variations. Alan as director in the studio: sleepy face, sleepless eyes, white or black T-shirt, shorts. He is among his crew, giving instructions, asking their opinion, talking to them. Fatigue perhaps makes him more irritable, blunt and honest, and toward the "other Alan" he acts as a living conscience or as devil's advocate. Presenter, emcee, DJ.

In his other role, Alan appears as a husband and soon-to-be father visiting the sleep specialists: light blue shirt, jacket. Marriage has presented him with a new challenge; his night-owl way of life must adapt to the new situation. He is awaiting the arrival of his son Eli, due in two months, and wants to do everything he can to be a good husband and a good father. Although he wants to be cured, he also has doubts. Can he give up forty years of ingrained habits, a way of life that was, moreover, bound up with his creative existence?

He is cooperative, friendly, curious and honest, but at times embarrassed by his weaknesses and not always eager to talk about them.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

One of the fundamental concerns of *Wide Awake* is the creative process itself, which forms a defining layer of the film. In the film's real time the viewer is given access to the director's actions, to the recording process, and even to the tasks and ideas about the shoot running through the director's mind, some of which have already appeared in the film or been carried out, and some of which we will see later.

The film begins in Alan's studio, where the voice-over for the opening dream scene is being recorded. Einstein's dream, take one, he announces, and begins: the disruption of the body clock caused by crossing time zones has been studied around the world; the greatest scientists in history… Then he breaks off: he has flubbed it; recording in the morning is death for him; once more. We see Alan, visibly exhausted from lack of sleep; then the recording continues. Einstein's dream, take two.[113]

Alan clearly wants the viewer to feel like a participant in the creative process, and wants it to be unmistakable that what we are witnessing is the process of filmmaking itself.

The film, then, tells a story. But let us pause here for a moment. We are witnessing the filming of the director's dream sequence, which, whether or not it is an entirely invented fictional element, is connected to a problem that has tormented him for decades and about which he is making a film. Here, then, the director brings his own life, problems and anxieties into the film as it is being made, wanting to tell a story about himself in the first person. Quite apart from the scripted, constructed and staged scenes, the way the director wants to be seen in the film also becomes part of the story, part of the construction of the personal documentary itself, in which conventional genre boundaries may blur. In a sense, I think, questions about the relationship between reality and fiction are inherent in the personal documentary, and the answers must always be sought in the particular film. What, in this case, is reality and what is fiction? Do we not constantly play roles in our everyday lives? How do we tell a story? Do we not have many faces? Do our internal arguments not unfold in much the same way?

What is at stake for Alan is a real problem that has tormented him for decades. Many of the fictional elements in *Wide Awake* are connected to real problems and conflicts that were unfolding while the film was being made, even if in dramatized form. At the beginning of the film Alan tosses and turns in bed and talks about his anxieties, and the scene is clearly not presented as an observational documentary moment. Or, toward the end of the film, he argues with himself over the recommended treatment:

> A (1): Try it.

[113]From *Wide Awake*, quoted in the dissertation from the HBO Hungarian dubbed version (Hungarian text: János Lajos Szabó); the English is retranslated from the dub and paraphrases the passage rather than reproducing the original soundtrack verbatim.

A (2): It could take months and might not even work.

A (1): Try it.

A (2): How can I make a decision like that in the middle of a film?

A (1): That's a lousy line. Everyone has to make hard decisions sometimes. And you're being unfair to Shari.

A (2): She knew I had a sleep disorder when she married me.

A (1): That doesn't make it any fairer. What do you want, to take sleeping pills for the rest of your life?

A (2): Can't you see how hard this is for me?

A (1): Stop being so stubborn all the time, and stop saying how tired you are. You're unbearable.

Besides touching on real problems, here too the immediacy of the ongoing shoot becomes part of the scene, feeding back into the situation and potentially even influencing the director's decision.

In another scene Dr. Richard Simon, a sleep specialist, asks whether he tends to work right up until bedtime. Almost always, Alan answers, and over archival footage we hear a sound montage of rapidly overlapping sentences, a flurry of tasks connected with the film:

> Find out the record for staying awake. Write down every saying and proverb about sleep. Find out what Maggie's Law is in New Jersey. Did Leonardo really sleep only a quarter of an hour? Look for outdoor clocks all over Manhattan. Find the National Sleep Foundation website. Write down the names of painters, poets and artists who suffered from insomnia. Find out how many kinds of alarm clock there are, and clock tickings. Find out about the Chernobyl disaster. What percentage of Americans drink coffee daily?[114]

Then, in nighttime footage shot with an infrared camera, Alan jots down notes for the film: dissolves in the Long Hotel; using the music from *The Twilight Zone* in the "zombie" sequence; filming sleeping plants. The scene shot in the long corridor of the Long Hotel and the sleeping plants both appear in the film, as does the *Twilight Zone* music in the "zombie" sequence.

In one of the film's later scenes, the studio, which until then has appeared only as a shooting location, comes to life in connection with an experiment. Before this happens, Alan, settled casually in a chair with a microphone in hand, turns to the audience: in case anyone is wondering why he doesn't just drink a cup of coffee and be done with it, he has had about twenty cups of coffee in his entire life. If he drank coffee, he wouldn't sleep for days; that has been his mantra for some thirty years. What really wakes him up is a shower. His family, his friends and, of course, many of the film crew keep urging him to drink coffee. All right: this morning he will skip the shower and go straight for a coffee. Back in ten minutes. Through a trick of editing he vanishes, and the film moves on to other scenes. But

[114]From *Wide Awake*, quoted in the dissertation from the HBO Hungarian dubbed version (Hungarian text: János Lajos Szabó); the English is retranslated from the dub and paraphrases the passage rather than reproducing the original soundtrack verbatim.

Alan keeps his word: ten minutes later the film returns to the studio and the coffee experiment begins, in the course of which, for the first time in thirty-one years, he downs a large cup of coffee.

A strange game is being played with time, as we saw in *Nobody's Business*, though in a somewhat different way. What the two have in common is the suggestion that the viewer is taking part, in real time, in the making of the film. The repetition, or discussion, of the recording of particular scenes points in the same direction.

In the studio, for instance, microphone in hand, Alan rehearses a single line again and again: that he will have plenty of time to sleep after he is dead. He wonders aloud whether it sounds a bit diabolical, whether *after I'm dead* is too much, whether *death* is too harsh a word. He tries the line once, twice, three times, decides it still isn't right, tries it once more, and finally asks whether he got it right.[115]

The signal is unmistakable: Alan is rehearsing on camera a role he has created for himself and needs the crew's feedback, while the audience is let in on the creative process.

But let us return to the coffee experiment. Alan addresses the crew, gives instructions to the cameraman, and the studio tour begins, led by a director made hyperactive by caffeine. We learn what is hidden in all those boxes in the colors of the spectrum (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet). An impressive archive opens up before us: black-and-white films, old newsreels, educational films, sound effects, color films, other filmmakers' outtakes, anonymous American home movies of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, Alan's own family films, photographs collected from the four corners of the world, and much else besides. Did he mention that they are in alphabetical order? Naturally. When you have this many things, you have to keep them in strict order. If he needs an image, he knows where to find it; the same goes for a sound; the point is that everything should happen at the speed of thought. Whenever he has an idea he writes it on a small slip of paper, and once he has carried it out, he impales it on a Chinese-style spindle.[116]

Here we must single out one very important type of box: the black ones. The black boxes, he says, hold pictures cut from newspapers; most of the history of the last twenty-five years is in these boxes.[117]

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[115]From *Wide Awake*, quoted in the dissertation from the HBO Hungarian dubbed version (Hungarian text: János Lajos Szabó); the English is retranslated from the dub and paraphrases the passage rather than reproducing the original soundtrack verbatim.

[116]From *Wide Awake*, quoted in the dissertation from the HBO Hungarian dubbed version (Hungarian text: János Lajos Szabó); the English is retranslated from the dub and paraphrases the passage rather than reproducing the original soundtrack verbatim.

[117]From *Wide Awake*, quoted in the dissertation from the HBO Hungarian dubbed version (Hungarian text: János Lajos Szabó); the English is retranslated from the dub and paraphrases the passage rather than reproducing the original soundtrack verbatim.



For his new film project, working title *10,000 Things*, on which he had begun intensive work two years earlier, Alan is using these many thousands of photographs cut from the *New York Times* as raw material. We see the beginnings of this project here, as he cuts out and archives the photographs at night and then sorts them in the studio. As he cuts picture after picture from the *Times*, we hear him do the math: if he has been cursed with three extra waking hours a night, he might as well use them. That comes to twenty-one hours a week, ninety hours a month, forty-five days a year, and, over forty years, eighteen hundred days: five more years in his lifetime to be awake, to think, to create.[118]

Wide Awake also includes a black-and-white recording of him from 1989 in which, smiling, he makes a cutting gesture toward the camera with his hand; and the same passion is perhaps reflected in the moment when young Eli steps among the countless photographs spread across the floor.

Alan hoped to finish this new project in time for Eli's bar mitzvah and to dedicate it to his son as a gift. This extremely exciting and ambitious project is, however, still in progress; according to Alan, it may be finished by the fall at the earliest.

HUMOR

One of the enormous virtues of *Wide Awake* is its humor, which is naturally often bound up with Alan's outstanding performance, expressed through close-ups, gestures and reactions. Much of the film's humor is built on subtle self-irony, in which Alan caricatures his own weaknesses and anxieties, at times exaggerating them. At other times the humor comes from the staging of his doubled self: several times, the director-persona corrects or comments on the version of Alan who is seeking treatment from the sleep specialists.

Alan confides to the specialist a nasty little secret: he has been taking sleeping pills for quite a while now. The bottle says not to take more than two or three a week, and only for a short time, but…

Alan the director, from the studio, urges him not to be afraid and to say it.

For a year now, Alan tells the doctor hesitantly.

For years! the director corrects him mercilessly.

This kind of subtle humor works fully only in its visual context, through performance.

[118]From *Wide Awake*, quoted in the dissertation from the HBO Hungarian dubbed version (Hungarian text: János Lajos Szabó); the English is retranslated from the dub and paraphrases the passage rather than reproducing the original soundtrack verbatim.



Hardly any actual jokes are told; perhaps only this one, which Alan tells Dr. William C. Dement of Stanford University: he had heard a frightening but very apt metaphor for sleep deprivation, that if you boil a frog little by little, the frog never notices that anything is wrong.

More often, however, the humor arises from unexpected visual references and juxtapositions, or from exaggerated cinematic quotations, interpretations and conclusions created by the collision of one scene with another. For example, Alan in the studio talks about the things that sometimes happen to him from lack of sleep: walking down the street on an errand, he sometimes forgets where he was going; two months ago, at a screening of his film, he simply forgot to bring the tape. The next shot shows newsreel footage of a collapsing building, while the commentary reports that witnesses likened it to an earthquake in New York, to the end of the world: people on 56th Street suddenly found themselves in a swirling cascade of stone, glass and metal when a crane on the forty-fourth floor came crashing down. The montage turns a moment of everyday forgetfulness into an apocalyptic consequence.

Alan lists for the doctor the many things he has tried in his fight against insomnia; the doctor asks whether he has ever counted sheep. Alan answers without thinking: no, after a few hundred he loses interest. Later, the counting continues in a sequence: first sheep, then fish, then frogs, a lion, gymnasts, workers stacking crates and leveling a road, and we are already past two hundred and eighty.

When we talked about the relationship between humor and his films, Alan shared the following thoughts. In our culture, at the level of stand-up comedy, humor means the jokes comedians tell; but humor is far more multifaceted than that. On one level it means breaking down taboos, speaking about things others do not talk about, or are afraid to talk about, or that exist only in the unconscious. We feel that he is allowed to say it, and this gives a kind of freedom, a kind of release, a kind of intimacy, which is reassuring and comforting, because it is always liberating when taboos fall. Another kind of humor has to do with freedom, with the play of thought. In his view, humor loosens the mind, lets thoughts dance and move more freely between different things. It makes connections; and it is this kind of humor, a combination of all of the above, that allows him to deal in the film, to some degree, with taboos such as family dynamics: to speak about what he calls, metaphorically, the "contracts," and the nature of the contracts, that exist between him and his father, between father and son, between brother and sister, between mother and son, between the living and the dead; about every relationship within a family.



Fundamentally, he would like to think that his films, through their unpredictability, their ability to connect unlikely things and their breaking of family taboos, evoke a kind of intellectual, inner smile in their viewers: not on their faces but in their minds. He does not need to see laughter on the audience's faces; he wants to see their minds smiling. Because a smiling mind is open, receptive and engaged, capable of the work needed to complete his film. It is willing; it can follow him; it lets him take it to unexpected places; it gladly throws itself into participation and collaboration. For him, that is where humor belongs; that is the role of humor in his films. His aim is never to make anyone laugh, though he does like to see people laughing at one thing or another from time to time.[119]

NEW YORK, MANHATTAN

In *Wide Awake*, compared with Alan's earlier films, the city itself, New York, Manhattan, plays a significant role. And not by chance: it is the city that never sleeps. The phrase immediately calls to mind the famous song by John Kander and Fred Ebb, in Frank Sinatra's or Liza Minnelli's rendition, with its wish to wake up in a city that doesn't sleep.[120]

This fantastic city, in constant motion, is a refuge for countless night owls. I remember once being unable to leave the university in Pittsburgh by car until late on a Friday, having arranged to meet Alan the next morning. I reached the Brooklyn Bridge around three in the morning; traffic was completely backed up, and we could only inch forward. Fortunately, the meeting with Alan had naturally not been set for an early hour, and it occurred to me that he might well be working at that very moment. And seeing all those cars in front of me, this suddenly seemed entirely natural.

New York, the City, appears at the very beginning of the film and becomes an important visual element of the storytelling.

The Manhattan Bridge by day, with skyscrapers dissolving into the haze behind it; then the same setup toward evening, as the lights are coming on. The top of the Empire State Building is outlined in light; everything is more exciting than in the previous shot; the night beckons. Then an ugly gray New York office building, and the same building in the evening, its illuminated windows forming striking vertical bands of light within a geometric pattern, the grayness gone in an instant. The same visual strategy recurs: we look out onto a street by day, ordinary and uninteresting, and then onto the same street in the evening, when it seems to vibrate with life, or is simply more beautiful. The method, then, is always the same: the same setup by day and by night. Meanwhile, on the soundtrack, we hear Alan explain that he truly comes alive at night, as the city does. That is when he can really work; in fact, every film he has ever made was made at night. One might, of course, say that he is torn between his two halves: the one who does not get enough sleep, and the other who never has enough time and worries about it.

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[119]From the author's interview with Alan Berliner, New York (Tribeca), February 20, 2016. The interview was conducted in English; as the original wording was not available for this translation, the passage is rendered in indirect speech rather than as direct quotation.

[120]"Theme from New York, New York," music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb (1977); recorded by Frank Sinatra and by Liza Minnelli. The dissertation quotes a line of the lyric, which is paraphrased here rather than reproduced.

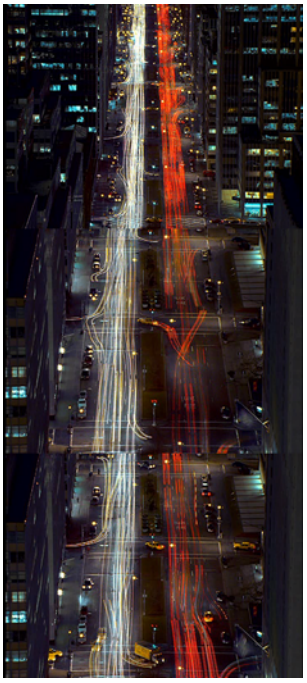


Manhattan also appears in the film's second dream sequence, a black-and-white passage. We see deserted New York streets at dawn; then a man crosses the street, swaying slightly. There is not a soul in sight; skyscrapers stand in the background, and a subway train curves along an elevated track. Meanwhile, in the narration, the dream is recounted: he wandered the city all night, looking for someone who could show him why other people are able to sleep. Morning found him at a police station, looking through mugshots. Having gone through nearly all of them, he suddenly pulled out a picture of his great-great-grandfather Solomon Isaac, whom of course he never knew, and who had lived back in Poland. For some reason he had to find him. His father told him he could only find him by putting on a helmet, a diving helmet. Next he finds himself swimming among a school of fish. There is even a certain logic to this, since he knows the man was a teacher in Poland. It is very important for him to ask the man how he slept; that is why he made this long journey. When he finally found him, the man smiled and told him, in a strong Yiddish accent, that he had the wrong person: he goes to bed with the moon and rises with the sun, so the boy should not blame him.

Although the imagination crosses space, time and even the ocean, reaching back more than a century to the small Polish village of Rajgród, it is the Manhattan dawn, after a night of wandering the city, that opens the gate to dream and remembrance.



Manhattan's next important role in the film comes on the long-awaited night and morning of Alan's life. The sequence of Eli's arrival begins with a nighttime image of Manhattan: we look out on the city at night from the window of the delivery room, where Alan is, of course, keeping vigil. The sound of the metronome marks the passing of time, and we see New York from the same setup. In the delivery room, excited anticipation; Alan, a little pale, smiles into the camera. The passage of time is marked by repeated views of the city as the light changes, still from the same camera position; dawn is breaking. Manhattan, together with the Berliner family, awaits the arrival of Eli Oz Berliner. The metronome speeds up; we see Alan in a mirror, camera in hand. And at 9:24 in the morning, a new New Yorker arrives.



A few minutes later the city reappears through a series of striking visual metaphors, first briefly in sped-up daytime footage shot from a car on the streets of New York.

Alan asks the sleep researcher why he can't sleep the way other people refuel: why he can't stay up as long as he wants, until he is completely exhausted, and then start again, refreshed.

Then we are back in a night image, seeing the city in time-lapse from a high vantage point. The result is an abstract nocturnal cityscape, restless and accelerated, its movement at times pulsing rhythmically. The lights of the cars form swarming streams, white on the left, red on the right; the opposing longitudinal streams are cut across by lateral movement. The image functions as a multilayered metaphor: on the one hand, the dynamism and abstraction of the movement created by the car lights may remind us of a living organism; on the other, the metaphor itself is born of the night. Without the night, this metaphor would not exist.

The sleep specialist talks about the brain cells involved in regulating sleep and wakefulness. These can also be imagined as a kind of programmed clock, which introduces another visual association: enormous gears, and then the ticking mechanism of a clock sets off an extraordinarily rapid montage in which a multitude of Manhattan clocks flash across the screen. Do we remember what Alan listed among his tasks for the film at the beginning?

Look for outdoor clocks all over Manhattan.



In this five-second passage alone, 150 images appear; in other words, the very short sequence is cut frame by frame.

Then a hand-cranked projector appears, its handle turning slowly, and in the following scene the clocks reappear at a slower pace, now long enough to be individually recognizable. A full moon emerging from behind the clouds opens a beautifully photographed nighttime montage of thirty shots. From the Manhattan Bridge to Times Square and the entrances to the New York subway, images of the living, vibrant night flash by, where people come together and fill the city: from couples embracing and groups sitting in a bistro to welders and night-shift workers in the street. This night seems exciting and alive, as though the city, too, felt better at this hour.



Meanwhile Alan sits working in his studio: for him, he says, the night has become a safe haven. He feels as if he were outside time: the darkness, the silence, the peace that pervades it. Food tastes better, music sounds more beautiful, and he is more alert.

Then comes the dawn, as though everything were slightly hungover: the gestures of a waking city. People returning home as the night ends, others setting out for an early-morning run; the sun comes up, the magic fades, and everything becomes ordinary again. This slower montage of some fifty images shows a slightly drowsy, still tired New York. Many people are still asleep on park benches. It is as though the city mirrored the director's rhythm and state of mind.

The final major Manhattan sequences unfold to the music of Charlie Parker, in black and white, with dazzling energy: the flickering headlights of cars cutting through the night create an abstract visual sequence that breathes with the jazz. Genuine visual poetry.

VIII

POETRY, TIME AND MEMORY: A FILM ABOUT EDWIN HONIG



"good Poetry… should shake one to the roots of his being."[121]

—Edwin Honig

"What you're doing is like writing a poem." [122]

—Edwin Honig to Alan Berliner

The last entry in the journal Alan kept while making *Nobody's Business*, written before the film was finished, reads:

> "Yesterday I showed about 15 minutes of the film to my cousin, the poet, Edward Honig, and his friend Jean Zaleskie, who is a remarkable painter. They responded very well, and I am encouraged. The film is beginning to touch a nerve. To reach a kind of truth about "identity." About some of the hidden places inside of "family." My father is so honest, so raw, so real. He's incredibly alive as a character. I just need to let him be himself." [123]

When Alan wrote these lines he can hardly have imagined that more than ten years later he would make one of his most beautiful films with his second cousin, friend and mentor Edwin Honig, whose luminous intellect had always been a guiding presence in his life.

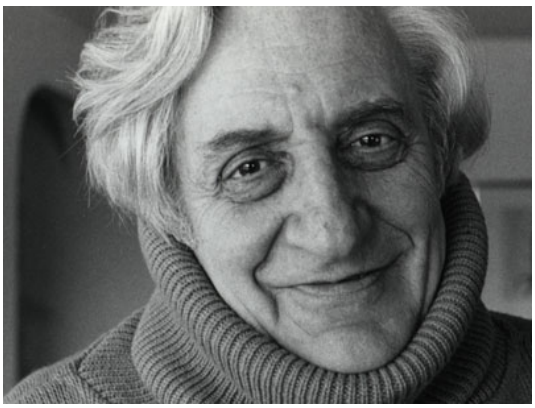
The journal entry calls to mind another sad fact connected with *First Cousin Once Removed*, a work of devastating beauty. A few years after the completion of the internationally acclaimed *Nobody's Business*, Oscar Berliner, struggling with increasingly severe memory problems, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, which in its late stage, before his death, left him with almost no memory at all.

When Alan learned that his mentor and friend had Alzheimer's, it touched him deeply on many levels at once, and this may have given him enormous creative energy in making the film.

> "First Cousin Once Removed is not a film I could (or would) have made about anyone else. It's the culmination of decades of deep friendship, mutual trust, family kinship, artistic kinship, countless long walks, telephone conversations, debates and discussions with Edwin Honig – my close friend, cousin, and mentor -- often centered on his insistence that art should always get to the heart of the matter – to the very bottom of things – an approach he valued in his life, applied to his work, and something I kept in mind throughout the making of the film." [124]

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[121] Edwin Honig, quoted at alanberliner.com.
[122] *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript. Edwin Honig to Alan Berliner.
[123] Alan Berliner, *Nobody's Business*: selected journal entries, 1996 (Saturday, April 6, 1996, 2:00 a.m.).
[124] Alan Berliner on *First Cousin Once Removed*; alanberliner.com.



Over the long decades of their friendship Alan had shot 16mm footage of Edwin Honig, some of which found its way into the film, such as the silent footage from the funeral of Honig's father. He also recorded an interview with him in 1989, he told *Magyar Narancs*, which appeared in an anthology about Honig. Edwin fascinated him in many ways, and he suspected that one day he would bring himself to make a film about him; he had even hinted as much. But he realized the matter could not be put off only when, during a conversation about memory, Honig said that something was wrong with his; Alan then asked whether he might bring a camera next time. A few months later he visited again, and the project began. For close to five years he visited him and recorded their conversations.[125]

The result of this friendship of several decades, and then of years of work, is a devastating, beautiful and profound film about the fragility of human existence, about memory, mortality, poetry and much else. In the course of the film we witness the quiet struggle of a gifted poet, once of extraordinary intellect, with his worsening illness. The poet discusses the fundamental questions of his life with perhaps the person closest to him, in a dimension of space and time that is hard to define: beyond life and on this side of death, at times without words. The poet, who summons words to reveal things in the world that often point beyond words, things found in a universe of images and feelings far removed from everyday reality, gradually loses command of his most important instrument: language. The basic situation is at once devastating and metaphorical, and it offers a filmmaker many possibilities. Clearly, such an immensely difficult undertaking is worth attempting only if the work can also reach, beyond an individual history of suffering, general and universal human insights and connections.

[125]O.S., "VERZIÓ: 'Üzenet a szakadék peremérŏl'—Alan Berliner," *Magyar Narancs* 2013/44 (October 31, 2013). The interview was published in Hungarian; the passage is rendered here in indirect speech, the original English not being available.



In the film's opening image the camera follows a leaf drifting in a stream, in close-up; from a distance we hear a strange, birdlike sound, while a woman's voice recalls a passage of verse, lines about entering a place where the unspeakable, the unseeable and the unsayable become visible, and about the sense in which people both want and do not want to see it.[126]

Then, indoors, we see the poet from below, and his sister Lila Putnam continues: here is a devastating illness that you are recording, and that it is important to record, because the man who was knighted by the Spanish and Portuguese governments can no longer remember the name of the device you are filming him with.

In the next sequence we see Alan stepping out of an elevator to visit, again and again, his friend and mentor, who has Alzheimer's, at his apartment in Rhode Island. The conversations span seasons and years, in an unpredictable order dictated by the illness, of which we can perhaps sense only the quiet, straining rhythm.

The scene is cut from more than twenty very short shots showing Alan, dressed for the various seasons, stepping out of the elevator, walking down the corridor toward Edwin Honig's apartment and ringing the bell; the cuts and the movement are given rhythm by the sound of the typewriter.



After the bell, Alan cannot be sure what will greet him, or whether his friend will recognize him. Here again we see footage recorded at different times. The film presents a montage of the first moments of these many visits: does the poet still know who Alan is, and why he has come? The varying reactions and gestures, cut one after another from different years, also establish a method and a rule of the game for the film as a whole; sequences of this kind recur several times. Edwin Honig's answer is usually a bewildered *I don't know*, expressed, of course, in the most varied ways.[127]

[126] Edwin Honig, lines quoted in *First Cousin Once Removed*. The verse is paraphrased here rather than reproduced.

[127] Alan Berliner also made a three-minute short from scenes, sentences and gestures cut from the film, entitled *56 Ways of Saying I Don't Remember*.



The lines that close the scene are disquieting in their very simplicity: that he does not have much memory now, that he has lost something. Meanwhile the film calls up a dramatic archival image of a bridge breaking apart in a storm and collapsing into the river, and off-screen we hear Edwin Honig's voice again:

> "I don't have much memory now. I've lost something I know there's a past, and I know that lived in it and that I gave it up to live only in the present." [128]

Playfulness and musicality appear very often in Edwin Honig's answers to Alan. It may be that, lacking words, the poet substitutes for them, or creates anew, with strings of syllables that can be judged only by their rhythm and sound, without concrete meaning, or with vocal gestures: the music he can no longer make with language.

Alan shows him older video footage, at least fifteen years old, in which Honig talks energetically in an interview about his career. In the film's present the poet watches it with some incomprehension, though with curiosity, and then asks: who is this? That is the man you were, Alan answers. It leaves me cold, Honig says, and goes on watching the video of his former self, adding with some irony:

> "He's trying to be someone" [129]

On the video we see Professor Honig again: he published a good many books, one of them on allegory. He thinks for a long time, then says only that he has forgotten the title.

Alan took on a delicate task in making a film about Edwin Honig during his illness. Showing the disintegration of the personality of a man slowly stripped of his memories, his thoughts and his self-determination can raise ethical questions. Medical practice holds that people with Alzheimer's dementia should decide in advance which treatments they will accept and which they refuse, for the time when they will no longer have the capacity to make such decisions. Edwin Honig knew about his illness and knew what awaited him, and it was with that clear awareness that he gave Alan his consent to the making of the film. Nor was that the only decision he made: he also directed that after his death his brain be donated to Alzheimer's research.

But Alan could work on this film without doubts or reservations not only for that reason, but because the collaboration rested on a friendship of several decades, on the relationship of master and pupil, indeed on what we may regard, as they did, as a relationship of father and son. Edwin was not his father, Alan told me in an interview, but he was a kind of father figure to him. And this son, or pupil, or friend surrounded his master throughout

[128] *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.
[129] *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.

with deep compassion, love and care, in order to raise a monument to him with an honest, beautiful and poetic film, dispelling every moral reservation.



In fact the film addresses this potential ethical question directly at several points. At the very start of filming, when Edwin Honig was in the early stage of his illness, Alan discussed it with him on camera:

> "How do you feel about that? Edwin Honig: That- Alan: I am making a film about you Edwin: That you're making a film about me? God bless you, have a good day, and come back again." [130]

There is another scene bearing on this, with Lila Putnam, Edwin Honig's sister, who probably disapproved of the filming at first:

> **Alan:** Lila, when we first starting talking, you expressed concern about showing Edwin the way he is right now.
>
> **Lila:** I only thought of the negative.
>
> **Alan:** And so what has changed your mind?
>
> **Lila:** I didn't know that he gave you permission to do it when he was lucid. So that does make a story out of it. [131]

Early in the film Alan raises his own fear of Alzheimer's and asks his friend's advice:

> **Alan:** I actually, have good reason to be scared.
>
> **Edwin:** Why do you say that?
>
> **Alan:** My father lost his memory around the age of 80, and his father lost his memory.
>
> **Edwin:** U-oh. Watch out. It may hit you one day.
>
> **Alan:** What advice can you give me?
>
> **Edwin:** Prepare yourself. It worst, than what you think. [132]

[130] *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.
[131] *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.
[132] *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.

There follows a metaphorical, dreamlike sequence built from black-and-white archival images: a conductor boards a train and it pulls out; at first we look out at the rails beside the engineer, then, through the water beading on the window, we sense the landscape passing in patches, without contours, and the motion of the train; then we enter a tunnel, where everything finally goes dark.



A hand pulls a lever and sets off a series of images: a circular movement along unrecognizable contours, perhaps something like a factory floor, after which the image dissolves into entirely abstract movements and flashes, while we hear the following exchange:

> **Edwin:** So, what can I tell you that would help?
>
> **Alan:** I' am interested in your experience, what it's like to be you right now?
>
> **Edwin:** Well, let's go where my problem is. There are things about the mind that you can't describe.
>
> **Alan:** You can try.
>
> **Edwin:** The mind can be blank and it will be going. That's the trouble
>
> **Alan:** So, you wouldn't know if the world was fucked up or not right now?
>
> **Edwin:** What world? [133]

After a few routine psychiatric questions, to none of which he gets a correct answer, Alan asks whether he would even know if the world were ending right now. What world? the poet replies with a playful smile.

Structurally the film is an essay film that sets up its own loose system of rules and is entirely free of didacticism. At one point Alan addresses the audience in writing, setting them a task while continuing his conversation with his friend: try to remember the following three words, in order: *armchair, tree, bird.*

Alan puts an essential question to the poet: is there anything he thinks he will never forget?[134] Meanwhile he shows Edwin an old photograph in which at first the poet recognizes only his grandfather; but Alan helps him: beside his mother and Edwin stands Stanley, the poet's younger brother, who died in a tragic accident.

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[133] *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.
[134] *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.

I killed him, the poet says, and continues:



Edwin: He ran across the street when he ran to get to me, and he got ran over. For a while, I remembered the face of the man in the truck who killed him. I could see him looking away. [135]

That image was etched deep into his mind even then, and he could not free himself from it for the rest of his life. Stanley was three at the time, Edwin five. His father blamed him for the accident; he felt it his duty to hold his son responsible for the death and to punish him for not having been good. It was a terrible burden, one Edwin could neither face nor live with.

Edwin sits in his old armchair in the solitude of endless time, looking out the window at the old trees, and even now the memory is with him: that face, and the tormenting guilt he never really came to terms with before his death. The worsening illness consumes his memories, his past; it leaves the poet one thing: this dreadful memory and the guilt attached to it.

Over quiet music, Sheryl, another friend of the poet, speaks:

> "Stanley crossing the street was in perpetual motion. Stanley was always crossing the street throughout Edwin's life and Edwin was always looking-looking back and not looking in time." [136]

The music we hear meanwhile, which Alan uses very delicately and sparingly, carries us into the next chapter (not, of course, marked by any title), which we might call Edwin and music; it is in fact through this theme that the poet's family is evoked. Edwin Honig's mother, Jane Freundlich, played the piano, and his father, Abe Honig, was a cantor. In old silent 16mm footage shot by Alan we see Edwin Honig saying goodbye to his father at his funeral. In place of the unrecorded eulogy we hear Edwin:

> "My father wanted to be God and wanted me to know that he is God." [137]

A black-and-white archival shot of an old typewriter opens the next chapter, which is about poetry. Edwin Honig knew by the age of seven that he would be a poet, and we return once more to his childhood, whose demons haunt him relentlessly. Many of his friends know these traumatic memories. Edwin told her about the sled his father gave him, on which his father had written the dates of his brother's birth and death, his friend Caryl recalls; Edwin put it in the bathroom, turned to face the wall, so that he would not have to look at it. Susan adds that Abe could never come to terms with his son's death and constantly tormented Edwin, who became the victim of that terrible rage. The parents divorced when Edwin was ten, and his grandmother brought him up.

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135 *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.
136 *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.
137 *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.

The childhood traumas, and then the love he received from his grandmother and the several languages he learned at that time, may all have contributed to his turn toward poetry.

Rapidly changing shots: a rolling ball, an explosion, then birds circling in the sky after a storm, and the conductor familiar from the short film *City Edition*. As the conductor cues the orchestra, the letters appearing around the full moon fall into place, spelling out the word POETRY. Then lightning and thunder follow, the letters vibrate on the screen, and a line of verse spoken by the poet takes shape:

> "You're rich, you beggar. You've got a clean page to start with" [138]

In this chapter further passages of verse are quoted, and Edwin Honig's meticulous notes come to light. Alan animates the notes, journal entries and fragments of manuscript with great energy; the mass of letters, words and sentences undulates like the sea: fifty years of memories that, for the poet, can now mean nothing more than sheets of unfamiliar paper.

> **Alan:** You know, I was looking through some of you journals, and you used to write down your dreams, ideas for poems, essays, articles, things every day the book you read, the friends you made, the place you went, you write it all down. E: Because I didn't want to forget them.
>
> **Alan:** Do you know that you kept those journals for almost 50 years? E: No [139]

The recurring visual metaphors of the section on poetry are birds, a flock of birds, the sky, lightning. The birds circle in the sky, or one of them pecks at a typewriter, or they take off from telephone wires. The mood of these black-and-white archival images suggests both a kind of timelessness and a sense of unease.

Meanwhile we hear Edwin Honig's voice:

Speaking of time, Edwin Honig offers something close to an aphorism: the expression of time is a piece of inspiration; if you know the sound you know the words, and if you know the words you already know what you can play. Then the poet turns to Alan: look at it this way, what you're doing is like writing a poem; you turn people's thoughts into something you would like them to think.[140]

Edwin spends a great deal of time in his armchair, watching through the window the foliage of the huge trees opposite as the years pass and the seasons turn. The film gives poetic form to change, constancy and movement, while a quiet, intimate conversation of singular mood unfolds between the poet and Alan:

> **Alan:** If you sit in this chair a lot, Then that view is very important to you.
>
> **Edwin:** Oh, yes. Getting to know these trees has meant great deal to me. At first, you see the, uh - What do you call them on the trees?
>
> **Alan:** The leaves? It very still, and yet in the stillness there's movement.
>
> **Edwin:** A moving painting. The leaves look the same, when you first look at them, but when you look at them for a while, you see they're different. They change without your

[138] *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.
[139] *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.
[140] *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.

> wanting the to change so they have some kind of meaning, that you have to believe in. The changing of the leaves. Somethings that moves all the time is a hard thing to get to know [141]
>
> **Alan:** I am trying to explore the threes as a metaphor.
>
> **Edwin:** You're trying to what?
>
> **Alan:** Explore the threes as a metaphor.
>
> **Edwin:** How do you begin to do that?
>
> **Alan:** Sometimes I think that each leaf is a memory.
>
> **Edwin:** I think I see something of the past in the leaves, the memory of the past in the leaves. [142]

Alan described to me how one of the film's decisive metaphors was born. When he first visited, he said, the trees were only trees and the leaves only leaves. And he listened to Edwin talk about them, understand them, take in their meaning, take in that intangible and profoundly simple process by which the leaves change color, fall and one day unfold again: the cycle of nature. He listened to him ponder it, meditate on it. And suddenly, since the question of memory was in the air anyway, he was able to see the leaves, in their countless forms, as memories: memories that turn from green to red, then orange, then yellow and finally brown, that wither and fall as memories fall away. This became the metaphor for Alzheimer's disease, for dementia. When they looked out the window in winter and the trees stood completely bare, they were heartbreaking metaphors for the illness. Edwin was a tree without leaves, a tree without memories. Someone losing his memories also lives through the late fall and early winter, when there are fewer and fewer leaves on the trees and those that remain are brown and withered, because we do not lose all our memories at once; we lose them step by step. On the basis of his conversations with Edwin he reframed and rethought what he had known about the cycle of nature, and came to see the trees and the leaves, and the view from Edwin's window, as metaphors. He recalled this and discussed it with Edwin too, partly in the course of the film.[143]

Because of the unpredictable course of Edwin Honig's illness, there are moments of quite exceptional clarity in which thoughts and images surface and glimmer, evoking the poet he once was in sadly beautiful fragments.

This conversation leads us into the chapter on remembrance, which begins by recalling Edwin Honig's first wife, Charlotte. He married her when he was barely twenty and lost her after twenty-three happy years. Charlotte was a true soulmate, but they could have no children. While his wife was fighting cancer, Honig took a year's leave so that he could spend all his time with her until her death.

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141 *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.

142 *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.

143 From the author's interview with Alan Berliner, New York (Tribeca), February 20, 2016. The interview was conducted in English; as the original wording was not available for this translation, the passage is rendered in indirect speech rather than as direct quotation.

The film also devotes a chapter to Edwin Honig's university career. His students and colleagues remember their mentor: a charismatic professor and poet, at times brutally honest, yet supportive of talented students, a man of great learning, great gifts and great generosity. Honig no longer even remembers that he was a department chair at the renowned Brown University, and of his role as a teacher he says only that he played with people and with lives. Many of his former students became friends over the years and keep in touch with him to this day.

Here the film uses an old video recording to recall a reading at which Edwin Honig read the poem he wrote about the death of his brother Stanley: a poem in which, in his sleep, he still hears a single cry and the endless screech of tires; in which his fair-haired, brown-eyed little brother trudges after him; in which a truck comes out of nowhere and knocks him down; and which ends by setting the long-dead not-quite-three-year-old beside the long-lived five-year-old who is slowly turning sixty-one.[144]



Edwin's devastating and wholly groundless guilt stayed with him until his death.

All his life the poet wanted to be free of this burden, through conversations and through poems; and here too, struggling with it in illness, he summons a devastating image by the magic of words, declaring that he has no brother named Stanley, that the boy grew up and became a nuisance, and that he runs about breaking open the ground and singing in the rain.[145]

The film's next chapter: Memory.

Alan recalls the subject of an earlier conversation with the poet. Honig knows what his cousin has in mind: memory. There follow black-and-white home movies from the 1920s and 1930s that we know from *The Family Album*; and meanwhile the poet talks about remembering, which forms a peculiar bond with these images.

He says the word "memory" brings with it a sense of time and of space as well. So much depends on memory. It tells you what the important things in your life were. The past is not what happened but what you remember happening. Everyone has his own film, and that is memory, the film of your life. What is memory: something that tells you that you are alive?

The footage used in *The Family Album* and recalled here was itself made in a gesture of remembrance: to snatch the beautiful and happy moments from everyday life and preserve them for the future. Most home movies travel the road of remembrance as Honig describes it, since most of them try to edit out pain, unhappiness and trauma.

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[144]Edwin Honig, read aloud in *First Cousin Once Removed*. The poem is paraphrased here rather than reproduced.
[145]Edwin Honig, read aloud in *First Cousin Once Removed*. The poem is paraphrased here rather than reproduced.

In *The Family Album* the director built, out of *these same recordings*, a past appearing in other connections, in order to speak also about the fundamental questions of existence.

Here Alan tells his friend about his own small son, Eli, whom he also films constantly. During their time together Eli gives the poet many beautiful moments, and Edwin Honig seems happy then.

Still on remembrance: railroad cars coupling together, accompanied by the rhythmic sound of a steam locomotive; then the interlocking movement of gears; finally we are in a tunnel, and Alan and Edwin Honig begin to count. After nine the poet goes on alone: one thing is connected to ten others, which are connected to ten others—and here he sticks, like a scratched record, and at least twenty times we hear: to ten others… to ten others… to ten others…

Meanwhile an astonishingly fast montage unfolds, visionary and extraordinarily suggestive, accompanied by the repeating voice: eighty-eight photographs from Edwin Honig's life spin past in a mere twelve seconds.

We travel on the train with its coupled cars; then drawers, documents, folders, and finally a stuck record player, at which point the old conductor (from *City Edition*) sets off thunder and lightning, so that the avalanche of images of forgetting, burying everything beneath it, can launch a rapid montage like the previous one. Here, however, far more intrusive, blurred and restlessly shifting abstract elements obscure the swiftly flashing photographs we saw in the montage of remembrance. A beautiful and precise piece of editing.

Alan described how the idea for the forgetting sequence came to him while we were filming at the 59th Street station on the A line of the New York subway. This is the Columbus Circle stop, he said, the northern end of the uptown platform, where the A connects with the C, and where the A also meets the B. It is a very important place for him, because it was while changing between the two lines that he hit on the idea of using film stock itself as the metaphor for Alzheimer's disease in *First Cousin Once Removed*. And during those barely twenty or twenty-five steps the idea of the mold also came to him: moldy film stock into which he inserted some fifty to seventy-five images, creating a kind of synaptic sensation, as though memories were passing, memories flashing up. It happened here, and somehow he always associates this place with that two-minute, slightly poetic sequence of the film, entitled Forgetting. Right here: the door opened, he walked across, and all the while he was thinking about this film stock, which was already in his head. Somehow everything happened at once: the A train pulling in, the door opening, his stepping out, his walking across, and this sudden insight. He always feels these things very strongly here. This place is a special part of the New York subway.[146]

Oscar Berliner also appears in this chapter, severely confused, taking his own son for his father. It is devastating. The scene closes with Oscar's words: sometimes he remembers, sometimes he doesn't; he just wouldn't want to end up here, he deserves better than this.

[146]From the author's filming with Alan Berliner, New York City subway, Columbus Circle (59th Street), February 2016. The account was given in English; as the original wording was not available for this translation, it is rendered in indirect speech.

Honig says he does not know where he came from, and Alan answers by invoking the bonds of identity: a shared past, a shared culture and history, shared DNA, family in both the narrower and the wider sense. *That brings us very close*, the poet says. Here the poet's grandmother appears, who was very close to Edwin. It was thanks to her that he learned several languages: Spanish, Arabic, Hebrew, Ladino and Yiddish.

The title of the next chapter: Translator.

The film revisits the extraordinarily rich body of literary translation Edwin Honig left behind, his renderings from the Spanish and Portuguese of Calderón de la Barca, Fernando Pessoa and other authors, for which he was honored, among other things, with Spanish and Portuguese knighthoods.

All right, the poet says, let the new story come; and it is none other than the story of his marriage to his second wife, Margot.

The poet had once been Margot's teacher; they met again years later, and Honig married the much younger woman. They could have no children, so they adopted two little boys, Daniel and Jeremy. The poet did not know what to do with the children, and in time his marriage broke down as well. Alan shows Honig pictures of the boys and asks whether he ever loved them. The poet answers evasively and asks Alan to throw the pictures away.

Of the two grown sons, only Daniel is willing to meet his father; Jeremy no longer even uses the name Honig.

In an evening scene the poet says good night to Alan before going to bed:

> "I like the way the sky change. It twist from one sky to another." [147]

The poet's words open a very beautiful sequence. Barbara, a poet friend, wonders whether remembering is possible in dreams, when there are no longer any words to call on:

> "I wonder when he sleeps what he dreams. It may be there where the memories are alive. He doesn't have the vocabulary anymore to express it, but who knows? In sleep, might be remembering what he can't find in the world." [148]

While Barbara speaks we are deep in the sea: an underwater rumble, fish gliding past, air bubbles rising toward the surface. Then, swaying, we lift our heads out of the undulating water; we are in the middle of the ocean, surrounded by somber clouds, in the middle of endless nothingness.

This image introduces a poem by Fernando Pessoa, which we hear in Portuguese, in Edwin Honig's own translation. Recalling who he was, the speaker sees someone else; in memory the past becomes present; the self he once was is someone he loved and who now exists only in dreams. What remains is a longing that is not his own, not even in the remembered past, but belongs to the one who lives inside him behind blind eyes. No one knows him but the present moment. His memories have become nothing, and he feels that who he is and who he was are two contradictory dreams.[149]

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147 *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.

148 *First Cousin Once Removed* (2013), dialogue transcript.

149 Fernando Pessoa, "Recalling who I was, I see somebody else," translated by Edwin Honig and read in *First Cousin Once Removed*. The poem is paraphrased here rather than reproduced.

In *First Cousin Once Removed* we witness a rare and exceptional meeting of poetry and film. The work is shot through with poetry and finds a cinematic form few have achieved. Through the figure of a poet taking leave of life, the gestures, the words, the images and the metaphors find in film a medium so natural that poetry becomes an organic part of the storytelling, and its quiet lyricism opens up new dimensions.

AFTERWORD

In the course of my two years of doctoral research I studied the work of a filmmaker close to me, Alan Berliner, one of the most gifted and most original makers of personal documentary. His films have traveled the world, have won prizes at numerous prestigious festivals and have appeared regularly on American and European television. His work has been received with great enthusiasm by the American and international press.

The aim of this dissertation has been to present a portrait of an artist through Alan Berliner's most important films, and at the same time, through the analysis of those films, to draw attention to the range of innovative solutions in film language that the creative, personal documentary makes possible.

In presenting the university years, the dissertation has sought to give a picture of the intellectual environment, and of the charismatic figures, that shaped Alan Berliner's career as a filmmaker. His roots in experimental film, as I have shown, were an important precondition for the formation of his own creative style.

After a number of short films, he made his first large-scale work in 1985: *The Family Album*, built from American amateur family footage of the 1920s to the 1940s. Already in this film we encounter a creative filmmaker with a strong visual sensibility, one who does not shy away from unusual and original solutions. *The Family Album*, however, still marks a transition between the short collage films and the later works, which make bold use of highly refined and richly varied formal solutions. In analyzing *The Family Album* the dissertation has examined the circumstances of the film's genesis, with particular emphasis on its innovations in film language, on the metaphors that appear in it and on its maker's self-reflexive intentions.

In his next work, *Intimate Stranger*, the stylistic markers, methods and cinematic devices emerge that would play a defining role in his later work. It is here that he develops the entirely distinctive storytelling technique, and the system of cinematic devices and motifs that goes with it, which become a constant of his authorial signature. These innovative devices of film language make the storytelling at once personal and captivatingly fluent, while these masterfully shaped films address fundamental human questions within a framework of visual poetry and metaphor, and still find their way to an audience. Although self-reflexive elements had already appeared in *The Family Album*, *Intimate Stranger* is the first work in which he uses the rich raw material of his own family history, making an unconventional cinematic biography of his maternal grandfather, Joseph Cassuto. *Intimate Stranger* is a formally innovative, meticulously crafted and extremely entertaining film that raises important questions about family and identity. In analyzing it, the dissertation has traced not only the moments of the family history but also the cinematic devices used in the work and the creative intentions behind them.

After the formally meticulous *Intimate Stranger*, Alan made a film in which he is present far more personally, reveals more of himself and takes a greater risk. Through the conflict of father and son, the film speaks once again about family, identity, history and long-lasting traumas. The cinematic chronicle of the "boxing match" between Oscar and Alan Berliner is, in my view, one of the high points of the personal, authorial documentary. The dissertation has examined the film's storytelling technique, its handling of time and the creative methods it employs, in terms of both structure and effect. *Wide Awake*, made in 2006, is a self-reflexive personal documentary that boldly uses fictional devices in its storytelling while also offering a glimpse into Berliner's creative process.

In his most recent and devastatingly beautiful work, *First Cousin Once Removed*, we witness a rare meeting of poetry and film. The work is shot through with poetry, and Alan finds a cinematic form few have achieved. Through the figure of a poet taking leave of life, the gestures, the words, the images and the metaphors find in film a medium so natural that poetry becomes an organic part of the storytelling, and its quiet lyricism opens up new dimensions.

Alan has been collecting the issues of the *New York Times* for more than thirty years. From the newspaper's photographs he is preparing an extremely ambitious work of synthesis, conceived as a kind of time capsule: a subjective film diary built from the press photography of the past decades.

I hope that this account of Berliner's creative methods and cinematic devices will also prove inspiring to filmmakers in Hungary who are open to thinking further about the means of cinematic expression, experimenting with them, and searching for new paths in documentary storytelling.

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APPENDIX 1

ALAN BERLINER: FILMOGRAPHY

The filmography reflects the state of Alan Berliner's work in 2017, when the dissertation was completed.

FEATURE-LENGTH FILMS

First Cousin Once Removed (2013), 79 min.
Wide Awake (2006), 79 min.
The Sweetest Sound (2001), 60 min.
Nobody's Business (1996), 60 min.
Intimate Stranger (1991), 60 min.
The Family Album (1986), 60 min.

SHORT AND EARLY FILMS

Everywhere at Once (1985), 10 min., color, sound
Natural History (1983), 13 min., color, sound
Myth in the Electric Age (1981), 13 min., color, sound, with commentary by Marshall McLuhan
City Edition (1980), 10 min., black and white, sound
Lines of Force (1979), 7 min., color, sound
Color Wheel (1976), 20 min., color, silent
Four Corner Time (1976), in four parts: *Line*, 8 min.; *Perimeter*, 11 min.; *Traffic Light*, 10 min.; *Intersection*, 11 min.; all black and white, silent
Patent Pending (1975), 11 min., black and white, sound

INSTALLATIONS

Disappearing Ink, video installation. Pratt Manhattan Gallery, December 2017
The Red Thread, audio and video installation. Clifford Gallery, March 2009
Playing God, seven-screen slot-machine-like game. The Contemporary Jewish Museum, June 2008 – January 2009
The Language of Names, multimedia project. Anderson Window Gallery, October 2002
The Art of War, interactive sound/image installation. Stephen Gang Gallery, March 1999
Gathering Stones, video installation. Eccles, February 1999
Critical Mass, audio and video installation. Sculpture Center, March–April 1996
Audiofile, interactive audio installation. The Film Society of Lincoln Center, January 1994
Late City Edition, media sculpture, 1991

PARACINEMATIC WORKS

Central Avenue (1992), photograph
Workprint (1979), photographic paper, splicing tape
Black and White to Color (1978), photographs
City Film Strips (1978), photographs
Intersection (1978), single-face corrugated cardboard
Splice (1978), wood stretcher, small light bulbs
Paper Films (1977–1983), various materials
Cine-Matrix (1977), 156 cardboard rectangles, 3" × 4" each

APPENDIX 2

ALAN BERLINER: AWARDS AND FESTIVALS

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

Freedom of Expression Award, San Francisco Jewish Film Festival (2013)

Festival Juror, Sundance Film Festival - Documentary Competition (2007)

International Trailblazer Award, MIPDOC Conference, Cannes, France. (2006)

Cultural Achievement Award in Arts (Nat'l Foundation for Jewish Culture) (2002)

Artist In Residence, Walker Arts Center, MN (2001)

Master in Residence, Atlantic Center for the Arts, FL (2001)

Storyteller Award, Taos Talking Pictures Film Festival (2001)

Righteous Persons Foundation (2000)

Martin E. Segal Award (Film Society of Lincoln Center) (1999)

Civitella Ranieri Foundation Fellowship, Italy (1999)

ITVS Funding Recipient (1999, 1995)

Corporation For Public Broadcasting Funding Recipient (1999)

Eastman Kodak Film "In the Works" Production Grant (1998)

Nominee: Film/Video, CalArts Alpert Award in the Arts (2000, 1999, 1997)

John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (1993)

Rockefeller Foundation Intercultural Film/Video Fellowship (1993)

National Endowment for the Arts Media Arts Grant (1998, 1993, 1989)

New York State Council on the Arts Grant (1999, 1993, 1992, 1991, 1989, 1985)

New York State Council on the Arts Film Distribution Grant (1992, 1986)

Center for New Television Consulting Award, Chicago, IL (1992)

New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship Award (1999, 1991, 1985)

Jerome Foundation Individual Artists Grant (1990, 1983)

Hoso Bunka Foundation Production Grant, Tokyo, Japan (1990)

Filmsearch Grant, Brooklyn Arts and Cultural Association (1986)

New York State Creative Artists Public Service, CAPS (1982)

State University of N.Y. Foundation Award for Creative Work in Cinema (1977)

New York State Regents Scholarship (1973)

FIRST COUSIN ONCE REMOVED

AWARDS

Grand Prize for Best Documentary Feature IDFA (2012)

Gotham Award Nomination for Best Documentary Feature (2013)

Cinema Eye Honors Nomination for Outstanding Achievement in Directing (2014)

Cinema Eye Honors Nomination for Outstanding Achievement in Editing (2014)

Short-Listed for Documentary Oscar Nomination (2014)

FESTIVALS

World premiere: October, 2012 New York Film Festival

International premiere: November 2012 IDFA (International Film Festival Amsterdam)

FESTIVALS AND SCREENINGS

Ambulante Film Festival (Mexico)

Arts & Ideas Festival (Yale University)

Cable Car Cinema (Providence, RI)

Cali International Film Festival

Camden International Film Festival (Maine)

Cineteca Nacionale (Mexico City)

CPH:DOX (Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival)

Docaviv
Dochouse (London)
doclisboa
DOC NYC
docsBarcelona
docsBarcelona+Medellin (Medellin, Colombia)
Documentarist (Istanbul, Turkey)
DocYard (Boston)
DocZagreb
Dokufest (Kosovo)
Edinburgh International Film Festival
Edocs (Quito, Ecuador)
Festivaletteratura (Mantua, Italy)
Full Frame Documentary Film Festival (Durham, NC)
Guth Gafa Film Festival (Ireland)
iDocs Festival (Beijing, China)
International Documentary Encounters (Bogota)
International Festival of Arts & Ideas (New Haven, CT)
International Festival of Science Documentary Films (Czech Republic)
Istanbul International Film Festival
It's All True (Sao Paulo & Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)
La Casa Encendida (Madrid, Spain)
Lake Placid Film Festival
Los Angeles Film Festival
Melbourne International Film Festival
Message to Man Film Festival (St. Petersburg, Russia)
Montclair Film Festival
Moscow International Film Festival
New Zealand International Film Festival
Norwegian Short Film Festival
One World Int'l Human Rights Documentary Film Fest (Prague, Czech Republic)
Planete Doc Film Festival (Warsaw, Poland)
Punto de Vista (Spain)
Quadrangle Film Festival (England)
Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montreal
San Francisco Jewish Film Festival
Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival
SXSW (Austin, TX)
Taiwan International Documentary Festival
University of the Arts (Philadelphia, PA)
VERZIO International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival (Budapest)
Viennale (Vienna International Film Festival)
Virginia Film Festival
Washington DC Jewish Film Festival

WIDE AWAKE

FESTIVALS

World premiere: Sundance Film Festival
International premiere: Berlin Film Festival

FESTIVALS AND SCREENINGS

American Film Festival in Moscow
Boston Jewish Film Festival
Buenos Aires International Independent Film Festival (BAFICI)
Cinéma du Réel (Paris)
City College of New York
Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival
Cornell Cinema (NY)
Dallas Video Festival
Edinburgh Film Festival
Festival Dei Popoli (Italy)
Flanders International Film Festival (Belgium)
Florida Film Festival
Fordham University (NY)
Full Frame Documentary Film Festival (NC)
Guth Gafa Film Festival (Ireland)
Helsinki Documentary Film Festival
HotDocs (Toronto)
International Contemporary Film Festival of Mexico City (FICCO)
International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA)
International Documentary Festival of Navarra (Spain)
Jacob Burns Film Center (NY)
Jerusalem Film Festival
La Casa Encendida (Madrid, Spain)
Lisbon International Independent Film Festival (IndieLisboa)
Maryland Film Festival
Milwaukee Film Festival
MIPDOC (France)
New School University
New York University
Nantucket Film Festival
Punto de Vista Documentary Film Festival (Spain)
Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal
Reykjavik Documentary Workshop (Iceland)

Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival
San Diego Jewish Film Festival
San Francisco International Film Festival
Sheffield International Documentary Festival
SXSW (Austin)
Sydney Film Festival (Australia).
Ti-Ahwaga Performing Arts Center (NY)
Vancouver Film Festival
Washington DC Jewish Film Festival
Williamstown Film Festival (MA)
Woods Hole Film Festival

THE SWEETEST SOUND

FESTIVALS

World premiere: 2001 Berlin International Film Festival

FESTIVALS AND SCREENINGS

Athens Film Festival (Greece)
Bergen County Jewish Community Center (NJ)
Berlin Jewish Film Festival
Boston Jewish Film Festival
Boston University Documentary Film Festival
Brighton Jewish Film Festival (UK)
Center For Jewish History (NYC)
Center For Public Intellectuals (Chicago, IL)
Clemson University (SC)
Council on Foundations Film Festival (Chicago, IL)
Dallas Video Festival (TX)
Danish Film Institute
Doubletake Documentary Film Festival (NC)
Duke University (NC)
Enzian Theatre (FL)
Eye & Thou Jewish Autobiography Conf. (NYC)
Festival de Creacion Audiovisual de Navarra (Spain)
Festival dei Popoli (Florence, Italy)
Florida Film Festival
Fox Theatre (Redwood City, CA)
Harn Museum (FL)
Helsinki Documentary Film Festival
Hirshhorn Museum (Washington, DC)
Hong Kong Jewish Film Festival
International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA)
Jacob Burns Film Center (Pleasantville, NY)
Jerusalem International Film Festival
Lake Placid Film Forum (NY)
Las Vegas Celebration of Jewish Cinema
Leipzig International Documentary Film Festival
Maryland Film Festival
Melbourne Jewish Festival (Australia)
Miami Jewish Film Festival
Millsaps College (Jackson, MS)
Montreal Jewish Film Festival
Munich International Documentary Film Festival
Nantucket Film Festival
New Jersey Jewish Film Festival
Nickelodeon Theatre (Columbia, SC)
North Carolina State University
Norwegian Short Film Festival
Palm Beach Jewish Film Festival
Palm Springs International Jewish Film Festival (CA)
Perth Jewish Festival (Australia)
Philadelphia Jewish Film Festival
Purbeck Film Festival (England)
San Diego Jewish Film Festival
San Francisco Jewish Film Festival
Seattle Jewish Film Festival
Sheffield International Documentary Film Festival
South By Southwest Film Festival (TX)
Stockholm Jewish Film Festival
Sweet Briar College (VA)
Sydney Jewish Festival (Australia)
Taos Talking Pictures
Toronto Jewish Film Festival
University of California at Los Angeles
University of Southern California
Vashon Island Film Festival (WA)
Viennale (Austria)
Viewpoint Documentary Film Festival (Ghent, Belgium)
Visions du Réel Documentary Film Festival (Nyon)
Walker Art Center (MN)
Wesleyan University (CT)
Wheeler Auditorium (Berkeley, CA)

NOBODY'S BUSINESS

AWARDS

Emmy Award National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (1998)

Henry Hampton Award For Excellence in Film & Digital Media Council on Foundations Film and Video Festival (2002)
Visionary Award Chicago Silver Images Film Festival (2000)
National Media Owl Award Retirement Research Foundation (1998)
Director's Choice Award Charlotte Film and Video Festival (1998)
International Film Critics Association Prize Berlin International Film Festival (1997)
The Caligari Film Prize Berlin International Film Festival (1997)
Churches of the Ecumenical Jury Prize Berlin International Film Festival (1997)
Golden Spire Golden Gate Award San Francisco International Film Festival (1997)
Grand Prize Visions du Réel Int'l Documentary Film Festival (Nyon, Switzerland) (1997)
Gold Apple National Educational Media Network (1997)
Audience Award for Best Documentary Feature Florida Film Festival (1997)
The Mayor's Prize for Best Documentary Jerusalem International Film Festival (1997)
First Prize for Innovation in Documentary Festival dei Popoli (1997)

FESTIVALS

Athens International Film Festival (Greece)
Auckland Film Festival (New Zealand)
Australia Jewish Film Festival
Barcelona Festival de Cine Independiente (Spain)
Berlin International Film Festival
Berlin Jewish Film Festival
Boston Jewish Film Festival
Brighton Jewish Film Festival (England)
Charlotte Film and Video Festival
Cinéma du Réel Documentary Film Festival (Paris)
Council on Foundations Film and Video Festival (Chicago)
Denver International Film Festival
Denver Jewish Film Festival
Doc Aviv (Israel)
Documentarist Documentary Days (Istanbul, Turkey)
Festival de Creacion Audiovisual de Navarra (Spain)
Festival dei Popoli (Italy)
FRAMES OF REFERENCE (Guggenheim Museum, NYC)
Florida Film Festival (Orlando)
Guth Gafa Documentary Film Festival
INPUT '98: International TV Conference (Germany)
International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA)
James River Festival of the Moving Image (VA)
Jerusalem International Film Festival
Las Vegas Celebration of Jewish Cinema
Ljubljana Documentary Film Festival (Slovenia)
Margaret Mead Film Festival
Message to Man (St. Petersburg, Russia)
Miami Jewish Film Festival
Mostra Internacional do Filme Etnográfico Festival (Brazil)
New York Film Festival (World Premiere)
New York Jewish Film Festival
Nordisk Panorama (Helsinki, Finland)
Norwegian Short Film Festival
Palm Beach Jewish Film Festival
Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema
San Diego Jewish Film Festival
San Francisco International Film Festival
San Francisco Jewish Film Festival
Sao Paulo Jewish Film Festival (Brazil)
Semana Internacional de Cine de Valladolid (Spain)
Sheffield International Documentary Film Festival (England)
Sights Of The Turn of the Century Docu. Film Fest. (Mexico)
Silver Images Film Festival (Chicago)
Stockholms Judiska Filmfestival (Sweden)
Tahoe International Film Festival
Tampa Jewish Film Festival
Taos Talking Pictures
Toronto Jewish Film Festival
Tucson Jewish Film Festival
Viewpoint Int'l Documentary Film Festival (Ghent, Belgium)
Vienna International Film Festival
Visions du Réel Int'l Docu. Film Festival (Nyon, Switzerland)
Wellington Film Festival (New Zealand)

SCREENINGS WITH THE FILMMAKER IN PERSON

Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art (CT)
American Jewish Historical Society (NYC)
Arsenal Cinema (Berlin)
Asheville Art Museum (NC)

Austin Film Society (TX)
Beaufort Museum of Art (NC)
Bergen County Jewish Community Center (NJ)
Boston University Documentary Film Festival
Brooklyn Heights Synagogue (NYC)
Center for Jewish History (NYC)
Cinémathèque de Toulouse (France)
Clemson University (SC)
Cleveland Jewish Community Center (OH)
Colgate University (NY)
Columbia University Conference on Oral History (NYC)
Cornell Cinema (NY)
Crandall Library (Glens Falls, NY)
Duke University (NC)
English Language School Fundraising Benefit (St. Louis)
Everson Museum (Syracuse, NY)
Film Arts Foundation "Meet the Mavericks" (San Francisco)
Gallaudet University (MD)
Gerontological Society of America (Philadelphia)
Hallwalls (Buffalo, NY)
Hamilton College (NY)
Hirshhorn Museum (DC)
Indiana University
Ithaca College (NY)
Kommunales Kino (Stuttgart, Germany)
Millsaps College (MS)
Minneapolis Institute of Art (MN)
Mostra Euroamericana de Cine Video y Arte (Buenos Aires)
Munson-Williams Proctor Institute (Utica, NY)
Museum of Fine Arts (Houston, TX)
Museum of Modern Art Cineprobe (NY)
National Genealogical Society Conference (Valley Forge, PA)
New Museum (NYC)
New School For Social Research (NYC)
New York University (NYC)
Nickelodeon Theatre (Columbia, SC)
Northeast Historic Film (Bucksport, ME)
Pacific Film Archive (CA)
Partnership For Jewish Life (NYC)
Port Washington Public Library (NY)
P.O.V. 10th Anniversary Preview (Tribeca Film Center, NYC)
Rhode Island School of Design
Rochester Institute of Technology (NY)
San Francisco State University
Sarah Lawrence College (NY)
State University of New York at Binghamton
State University of New York at New Paltz
Sweet Briar College (VA)
Temple Emanu-el (NYC)
University of the Arts (Philadelphia)
University of California at Los Angeles
University of Colorado
University of North Carolina (Raleigh)
University of Southern California (Eye and Thou Conference)
University of South Carolina (Orphans of the Storm Conference)
University of Texas (Austin)
Upstate Films (Rhinebeck, NY)
Virginia Festival of American Film (Charlottesville)
Walker Art Center (Minneapolis)
Washington DC Jewish Community Center
Webster University (St. Louis)
Wesleyan University (CT)

PERMANENT COLLECTIONS

Adelphi University Library
American Psychiatric Association (DC)
American University (DC)
Amherst College (MA)
Andalusia Public Library (AL)
Arkansas State University
Augustana College (SD)
Brigham Young University (UT)
Broward County Main Library (FL)
Brown University Center For Modern Culture and Media
Bucks County Free Library (PA)
California Institute of the Arts
California State University (Monterey)
Cazenovia College (NY)
Coker College (SC)
Columbia University (NY)
Columbia County Public Library (FL)
Concordia University (Canada)
Conestoga College (Ontario, Canada)
Congregation Beth Israel (Charlottesville, VA)
Crandall Public Library (NY)
Cuyahoga County Public Library (OH)
Dallas Public Library
Dickinson College
Donnell Media Center (NYC)

Duke University
East Baton Rouge Parish (LA)
Eastern Illinois University
Emerson College
Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design (Vancouver, CA)
Emory University
Everson Museum (Syracuse, NY)
Exploratorium (San Francisco, CA)
Facets Video (IL)
Forum of New Cinema, Berlin Film Festival (Germany)
Franklin and Marshall College (PA)
Green County Public Library (OH)
Harvard University (MA)
Holocaust Museum Houston (TX)
Hope College (MI)
Indiana University
Israel Museum
Israel Genealogical Society
Ithaca College Library (NY)
Jerusalem Cinematheque (Israel)
Kim's Video (NYC)
Knox County Public Library (TN)
Kokomo-Howard City Public Library (IN)
Lakeland Community College (OH)
Loma Linda University (CA)
Loyola University
Maui Community College
Marianopolis College (Quebec, CA)
Mary Baldwin College (VA)
Maryland Historical Trust
McMaster University (Ontario, CA)
Miami-Dade Public Library (FL)
Middlebury College (VT)
Montclair State University (NJ)
Nassau Public Library (NY)
National Film and Television School (London, England)
National Museum of American Jewish History (Philadelphia)
Newton Public School System (MA)
New York Public Library
New Zealand Federation of Film Societies
Norfolk Academy (VA)
Northwestern University
Notre Dame University
Ohio University
Oslo Cinematheque (Norway)
Ottawa University (AZ)
Pandora Co. Ltd., (Japan)
Port Washington Public Library (NY)
Portland State University
Ramsey County Library (MN)
Rhode Island School of Design
Richland County Public Library (SC)
Roanoke City Public Library (VA)
Rochester Institute of Technology (NY)
Rutgers State University (NJ)
San Francisco State University
Santa Cruz Public Library
Sarah Lawrence College (NY)
School of Art Institute of Chicago
Simon Fraser University
Sonoma State University (CA)
Spokane Falls Community College (WA)
St. John Fisher College (NY)
St. Mary's College of Maryland
Stanford University
State Library of Florida
State University of New York at Buffalo
Timberland Regional Library (WA)
Tufts University
University of the Arts (Philadelphia, PA)
University of Baltimore
University of California at Berkeley
University of California at Irvine
University of California at Los Angeles
University of California at Riverside
University of Florida
University of Georgia
University of Glasgow
University of Hawaii Library
University of Illinois at Springfield
University of Kansas
University of Maryland
University of Milwaukee Wisconsin
University of Minnesota
University of North Texas
University of Oklahoma
University of Ottawa
University of Richmond (VA)
University of Rochester
University of Sarasota (FL)
University of Southern California
University of Sussex (UK)
University of Texas at Austin
University of Texas at Dallas
University of Vermont

Ventura Films (Germany)
Wabash College (IN)
Washington State Library
West Virginia Library Commission
Yale University

INTIMATE STRANGER

AWARDS

Distinguished Achievement Award International Documentary Association (1993)
EMMY Nomination National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (1993)
First Prize Blue Ribbon American Film/Video Festival (1992)
First Prize, Non-Fiction Category USA Film Festival (1992)
Special Jury Award Cinéma du Réel Film Festival (1992)
Audience Award San Francisco Int'l Film Festival (1992)
Special Jury Citation Black Maria Film Festival (1991)

FESTIVALS

World premiere: New York Film Festival, October 3, 1991
American Film/Video Festival
Auckland Film Festival (New Zealand)
Berlin Jewish Film Festival
Black Maria Film Festival
Boston Jewish Film Festival
Cinéma du Réel Film Festival (Paris)
Citylore Film Festival
Denver International Film Festival
Denver Jewish Film Festival
Doc Aviv (Israel)
Docufest (Los Angeles)
Documentarist Documentary Days (Istanbul, Turkey)
Festival de Creacion Audiovisual de Navarra (Spain)
Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival
International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA)
International Sephardic Film Festival
Jerusalem Film Festival
Las Vegas Celebration of Jewish Cinema
London Jewish Film Festival
Margaret Mead Film Festival
Miami Film Festival
New York Jewish Film Festival
Nordisk Panorama (Finland)
Norwegian Short Film Festival
Pesaro Film Festival (Italy)
Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema
Rotterdam Film Festival
San Francisco International Film Festival
San Francisco Jewish Film Festival
Sao Paulo Jewish Film Festival (Brazil)
Sheffield International Documentary Film Festival (UK)
Sundance Film Festival
Tampa Jewish Film Festival
Toronto Jewish Film Festival
USA Film Festival (Dallas)
Viewpoint Documentary Film Festival (Ghent, Belgium)
Virginia Festival of American Film
Virginia Festival of Jewish Film
Wellington Film Festival (New Zealand)
Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (Japan)

SCREENINGS WITH THE FILMMAKER IN PERSON

Appalshop (KY)
Arsenal Theater (Berlin)
Artists Space (NYC)
Bergen County Jewish Community Center (NJ)
Biograph Theatre (DC)
Bnai Jeshrun Synagogue (NYC)
Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MA)
Brigham Young University (UT)
Clemson University (SC)
Colgate University (NY)
Columbia Museum of Art (SC)
Crandall Library (NY)
Daytona Beach Community College (FL)
Duke University (NC)
Eccles Institute of Human Genetics (UT)
Enzian Theatre (FL)
Film Society of Lincoln Center (NY)
George Eastman House (NY)
Hampshire College (MA)
Hamilton College (NY)
Hewlett-Woodmere Public Library, (NY)
High Museum of Art (GA)
Hirshhorn Museum (DC)
Honolulu Academy of Art (HI)
Hunter College (NY)

International House of Japan (Tokyo)
Japan Society (NYC)
Jewish Museum (NYC)
Kentucky Center For The Arts (KY)
Los Angeles County Museum of Art (CA)
Munson Williams Proctor Institute (NY)
Museum of Fine Arts (Houston, TX)
Museum of Modern Art (NYC)
New Community Cinema (NY)
New School for Social Research (NY)
911 Media Arts Center (WA)
North Carolina State University (NC)
Northern Westchester Center for the Arts (NY)
Northwest Film/Video Center (OR)
Pacific Film Archives (CA)
Port Washington Public Library (NY)
Rocky Mountain Film Center (CO)
San Francisco Cinematheque (CA)
Southeast Center for Contemporary Art (NC)
Stanford University (CA)
University of Utah (UT)
Upstate Films (NY)
Utica College (NY)
Webster University (MO)
West Chester University (PA)

CONFERENCES, SEMINARS AND LECTURES

National Film Board of Canada "What's Up Doc" International Documentary Seminar (Toronto, Canada) 1994
INPUT 93 International Public TV Conference (Bristol UK)
Kam Isaiah Israel Synagogue (Chicago, IL)
Lecture by Philip Lopate 1992

PERMANENT COLLECTIONS

Adelphi University Library
Amherst College
Arkansas State University
Brigham Young University
California State University (Monterey)
Charleston Cultural Center (WV)
Columbia University
Daytona Beach Community College Library
Duke University
Emory University
Facets Video
Hampshire College
Harvard University (MA)
Holocaust Museum Houston
Hoso Bunka Foundation (Japan)
Indiana University
International Documentary Association
Israel Museum
Middlebury College (VT)
Montclair State University (NJ)
Museum of Modern Art
New York Public Library System
Ohio University
Port Washington Public Library
Sarah Lawrence College (NY)
South Illinois University
Stanford University
State University of New York at Buffalo
Texas A&M University
University of the Arts (Philadelphia, PA)
University of Florida (Gainesville)
University of Texas Library (Austin)
University of Virginia
Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (Japan)

THE FAMILY ALBUM

AWARDS

First Prize Blue Ribbon, American Film/Video Festival (1987)
Golden Gate Award, "Experiments in Form" San Francisco Int'l Film Festival (1987)
Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial Exhibition (1987)

FESTIVALS

American Film/Video Festival 1987
Athens International Film Festival 1987
Auckland Film Festival (New Zealand) 1993
Cinéma du Réel (Paris, France) 1993
Citylore Film Festival 1993
Cleveland International Film Festival 1988
Denver International Film Festival 1987
Denver Jewish Film Festival 1997
Edinburgh International Film Festival 1987
Festival de Creacion Audiovisual de Navarra (Spain)
Film Expo, New Mexico Center for Contemporary Arts 1992
"Generations" Exhibition, Smithsonian Institute 1987
International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) 2006
Miami Film Festival 1993
Munich International Film Festival 1987

New York Jewish Film Festival 1997
Nordisk Panorama (Finland) 1997
Norwegian Short Film Festival 1997
Sao Paulo Jewish Film Festival (Brazil) 1998
Sheffield International Documentary Film Festival (UK) 1997
Sundance Film Festival 1988
Third Annual Festival of American Folk Cultural Films (NYC) 1988
33rd Robert Flaherty Film Seminar 1987
Turin International Film Festival (Italy) 1987
Wellington Film Festival (New Zealand) 1993

CONFERENCES, SEMINARS AND LECTURES

THE CRAFT OF EDITING, Lecture, The Honolulu Academy of Art (HI) 1992
THE FAMILY FILM, "Fast Rewind: The Archaeology of Moving Images," Conference Speaker at Rochester Institute of Technology (NY) 1989

PERMANENT COLLECTIONS

Adelphi University Library (NY)
Alfred University (NY)
American Federation of the Arts
Amherst College
Arkansas State University
Brigham Young University
Bryn Mawr College (PA)
Carleton College (MN)
Columbia College (IL)
Columbia University (NY)
Detroit Institute of Arts
Duke University
Emory University
Facets Video (IL)
Free Library of Philadelphia (PA)
Harvard University (MA)
Holocaust Museum Houston
Indiana University Libraries
Israel Museum
Medgar Evers College (NY)
Metropolitan Toronto Library System
Mid Hudson Library System (NY)
Middlebury College (VT)
Montclair State University (NJ)
Museum of Modern Art
National Film and Television School (London, England)
New York Public Library System
Otis College of Art and Design
Pennsylvania State College
Port Washington Public Library
Quinnipiac University
San Jose State University
South Illinois University
Stanford University
SUNY Buffalo
Texas A&M University
University of Arizona
University of the Arts
University of Delaware
University of Florida (Gainesville)
University of Sussex (UK)
University of Vermont
Virginia Commonwealth University
Wayne State University

EVERYWHERE AT ONCE

Honorable Mention, Bucks County Film Festival (1986)
Grand Prize Winner, Ann Arbor Film Festival (1985)
Television Broadcast: INDEPENDENT FOCUS, WNET/Thirteen (1990)

NATURAL HISTORY

Honorable Mention, Bucks County Film Festival (1985)
Television Broadcast: WNYC, "The Garden of Eden" (1984)

EDITING AWARDS

Intimate Stranger, Film Editing EMMY Nomination (1993)
Broadway's Dreamers: The Legacy of the Group Theatre, American Masters: Golden Plaque Award, Chicago Int'l Film Festival (1989)
Slave Ships of the Sulu Sea, ABC News, Sound Editing EMMY Award (1986)
To Swim With the Whales, ABC News, Sound Editing EMMY Nomination (1985)
The Berlin Wall, ABC News, Sound Editing EMMY Nomination (1983)
FDR: A Biography, ABC News, Sound Editing EMMY Award (1982)