

FIRST PERSON JEWISH

By Alisa Lebow

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At 203 pages, the last 41 of which are the annotations to the previous 159 pages, tells the reader, that despite its slimness and modest black and white cover design, this book is not for the faint of heart.

Imbrications, the public imaginary, autoenunciative, situatedness, positionality, subaltern's arrogation, polysemous, disaggregatedness, syntagmatic, hermeneutical, autobiothantoheterographies (yes, one word), double-voicedness, multivocality, ineluctable, revenant, these are just a few of the words and phrases that hit me in the head in the first few pages of the introduction alone. I ran for my dictionary knowing that I faced a challenge.

We can safely infer from the writing style that Alisa Lebow is indeed an academic. She is a lecturer in film and TV studies at Brunel University. She also informs us early on in the book that she is a filmmaker and will include her own film *Treyf* (1998) as part of her analysis. Initially I found this approach a bit suspect. Is Lebow using the writing of this book as a thinly disguised vehicle for promoting her own film? Perhaps elevating it to a position on the same level as the other, more recognizable films and filmmakers she covers in her analysis, filmmakers whose work I'm familiar with such as Barbara Myerhoff, Chantal Akerman, Alan Berliner, and most recently Jonathan Caouette of *Tarnation* fame?

Lebow admits that the films she has chosen to focus on in this study: *D'Est* (1993) by Chantal Akerman; *Everything's for You* (1989) by Abraham Ravett; *Thank You and Goodnight* (1991) by Jan Oxenberg; *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993) by Gregg Bordowitz; *Rootless Cosmopolitans* (1990) and *Cheap Philosophy* (1993) by Ruth Novaczek; *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* (1994) by Deborah Hoffmann; *Nobody's Business* (1997) by Alan Berliner; *Daughter Rite* (1979) by Michelle Citron; *Tarnation* (2004) by Jonathan Caouette; *Phantom Limb* (2005) by Jay Rosenblatt; *In Her Own Time* (1985) by Barbara Myerhoff and Lynne Littman; and her own film *Treyf* (1998) made in collaboration with Cynthia Madansky, are not

“blockbusters” not widely seen, and not easy to find, even if one goes looking. One of her stated goals is to make them more familiar to the reader by the end of the book.

What makes a film “Jewish”? It seems that this simple question does not have a simple answer, although Lebow attempts to define it. Even the “First Person” part of the book title turns out to be debatable, difficult to categorize. While admitting that there is a “crisis of definition and categorization that plagues documentary” Lebow proceeds to tell us her five key criteria in selecting the films in this study:

1. Independent Films
2. Documentaries
3. Autobiographical
4. Made by diasporic Jewish filmmakers (In trying to further describe the “Jewish” criterion Lebow admits this is “highly problematic”)
5. Aesthetically innovative.

It is the answer to the “Jewish” question that seems the most amorphous. I found one of the most revealing statements addressing this issue is made by Lebow in the introduction. She states, “Regardless of how the filmmaker wants to position a given film in relation to Jewish identity, I discuss each film with regard to a set of reading practices. In practical terms, this means that the Jewishness of the film may inhere more in my reading of it than in the film’s or filmmaker’s own insistence.” “Watching Jewishly” – sounded absurd to my ears – then Lebow goes on to redeem herself, which she frequently does throughout the book, by stating “There is no one way to watch Jewishly, and in the course of this book I hope to propose alternative approaches to the encounter.” Here Lebow has revealed the helplessness of “the Artist” to control the interpretation of or the reading of his or her work, once it is “out there” at the mercy of the audience, the critic and the academic who will chose to ignore how (in this case “the filmmaker”) wants to position themselves.

I found myself arguing with Lebow throughout the book. As I encountered phrases like “an oxymoronic methodology of acute indirectness” these words acquired an abstract poetic resonance that existed on their own plain quite separate from me gaining any insight into the works under discussion. However, in spite of these distractions, each chapter had it’s moments of superb insight that made slogging along well worth it. In the first chapter,

reference to Chantal Akerman, as the artist who is “condemned to repeat one’s obsessions ad infinitum” seemed not only particularly astute and particular to Akerman, but in deed encapsulates the fate of all those who pursue the making of “Art”.

By the time I hit page 39, Lebow had won me over. It is here she starts to make reference to Renov, domestic ethnography and anthropological relevance. Now this is an area of film discourse that I do know something about. This is my comfort zone.

In dealing with the minefield of the Jewish nuclear family as presented in such films as *Thank You and Good Night*, and *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* it is again the “Jewishness” part of the equation that “comes to the fore as more a mystery than a question in many of these family films.” Identity appears to allude us.

In her concluding chapter Lebow looks at the film *In Her Own Time* by Barbara Myerhoff. I found this to be the most satisfying, perhaps again, due to my penchant for ethnographic films and Myerhoffs own work being clearly situated in the world of cultural anthropology. It is in her analysis of this film that Lebow provides the clearest answers. She also answers the question of her own identity when she states in a paragraph near the end of the book, “in the absence of compelling evidence to dissuade us from our path, we, the filmmakers of this study...”.

Lebow, in the end, sides with the filmmakers, and if given a choice between reading this book, and watching those films, so do I.