

## Seeing (through) Red

SU FRIEDRICH

This essay is essentially an annotated version of my recent video, *Seeing Red* (2005).<sup>1</sup> The video combines shots of myself (speaking extemporaneously about personal matters) with montages of images of red things (objects, people wearing red, etc.) accompanied by selections from the Goldberg Variations by J. S. Bach. A list of the variations used appears at the end of the essay. The script below often ends in mid-sentence to mirror the video, in which the speech fades out as the music comes up.

The introduction is in italics; the verbatim script from the video is in regular roman type; the annotations are in a different font.

\* \* \* \* \*  
*After years of making auto/biographical work (about my mother, father, a breakup of a relationship, my medical problems, etc.), I thought I had fully explored the territory, as did most viewers of my work. However, I had never worked with the genre of the diary film because of a reluctance to speak directly to the camera. In fact, I tried like hell to avoid doing that, either by using voice-over actors or on-screen text even when it seemed necessary to use my own voice. Once in a while I was forced to employ my on-camera presence or voice, but only sparingly, until I made *The Odds of Recovery* in 2002. In that film, I appeared on camera more than I previously thought tolerable or acceptable.*

*Early in 2005, while complaining about being mired in a (very impersonal) video about coffee, my observant and forthright partner said, “You seem to be in such pain. Why don’t you make a video about that instead?” After swallowing my anger about the remark, I impulsively decided to take her up on what I saw almost as a dare, marched into my studio, turned on the camera and started talking off the top of my head.*

*Almost immediately, I started crying . . . on camera . . . oh god! So, having started to shoot with little forethought, I proceeded with slightly more thought, while actually not quite knowing what it was that I wanted or needed to say. In other words, I decided to talk, once in a while, on camera, about whatever was weighing on my mind and only later would I decide to do or not do something with the material. Eight months later, voilà! The video was finished and so also, I hoped, was my experience with being on camera.*

*For thirty years, I’ve worried about what it means to use private experiences—my own and those of people close to me—as subject matter. Everyone has his or her own*



*version of every experience, so whose version is the accurate one? Can the teller ever describe experiences they've shared with others without creating huge gaps, falsities, or errors gross and small? How can one not create a false environment the moment one turns on a camera or microphone? And the most unanswerable question of all: does my account of my own life have any value to anyone but myself?*

*With each film or video, I've made an uneasy peace with these questions (by deciding I was fair to my subjects [including myself], or accepting that I was being unfair, or asking for outside feedback in order to avoid the gross errors and unforeseen cruelties, etc.), but I've never stopped worrying. And the films do give ample evidence of the impossibility of being entirely accurate, honest, and fair: they can't help but be flawed, and the best I can do is to try and anticipate their shortcomings.*

*This essay could have been based on almost any of my films. With the older work, I've been through many screenings and have been asked many questions that reveal their limitations (including ones that pertain to the concerns of this book), but Seeing Red seemed the most germane. Since it is so recent, my ability to view it objectively is of course nonexistent, but the memory of those bothersome background noises is still fresh—which is how I refer to all the worrisome, panicky, and skeptical feelings I have while working on a new piece. So, without further ado . . .*

I walked into my studio one afternoon and set up the camera so that I was only showing my upper torso—from neck to below the breasts, with the lavalier microphone in full view. There was no need to show my face—what mattered at the moment was what I was saying, not how I looked when speaking. But I did look rather disheveled, so that was further reason not to show too much of myself. With little forethought, I started talking.

The fact is that I'm fifty years old and I don't seem to have any much more control over my feelings and my behavior toward other people than I did thirty years ago. I mean, I do have a little more control—sometimes I can stop and remind myself that I shouldn't be doing a certain something, or I should go out and have fun instead of driving myself crazy sitting at my desk working . . . but I just seem to be a control freak.

You know, I live in this big house with her and a couple of roommates and, you know, if I walk down the hallway, I see a piece of paper and I think, "Well, I wonder if anybody's going to notice that paper and pick it up," and after three days nobody, of course, nobody has bothered to pick it up because why should people be worrying about shit like that? But I go and I pick it up and I think, "You see, nobody noticed that piece of paper!"



And I go away to school and I put a note on the door saying “Please get the mail” and sometimes people don’t get the mail but most of the times they do because they also want their mail, so why do I think I’m the only one who gets the mail? And I’ve just worked myself up over the years into this, like, hideous, maniacal person who feels like everything has to be in its place and if things are out of their place then, you know, far better that I should go launder the napkins and pick up that piece of paper in the hall than, you know, sit. . . .

As I’m talking, I’m wondering how in god’s name I can use material like this. First of all, I’m dissing my roommates, current and past, and I know that some of them will eventually see this and will probably be offended at my description of their alleged carelessness and laziness. I also suspect that they’ll think I’m an ass for worrying so much about a piece of paper, and I know I am, and so begins the first circle of confusion: it’s good for me to admit a weakness, but doing it involves admitting negative thoughts about others, and I shouldn’t presume that my admission will compensate for the fact that I’ve insulted them, that they’ll “admire me” for having been so open about my neuroses. No, they’ll think I’m an ass and will feel offended. But they should admire me. But I’ve insulted them. But I’m being honest! But I’ve insulted them. Etc.

And boy oh boy, when I was seventeen and eighteen and nineteen I thought, “Fuck that, man, I am never gonna to do that!” And I spent a lot of years not having kids and doing . . . you know, eating out at shitty restaurants and doing my own work ’cause I thought I’ll be *goddamned* if I’m going to be a fucking housewife . . . and I have turned into a fucking housewife and I can’t stand it! (Cries.) . . . And then, you know, the things you can’t stand, you start finding a way that they’re good for you, so, you know, I bake! I bake all the fucking time and then I think, “Oh, the roommates will like it.” Or I bring it to school and everybody at school is totally thrilled and meanwhile what the fuck am I doing baking all the time, why am I doing this? I just don’t understand it! (Cries.)

That notation (Cries) does an inadequate job of describing the fact that, on camera, I’m bawling my eyes out. Seriously sobbing big, loud sobs. It’s ludicrous. Then again, isn’t it heartbreaking? Look how open she’s being! Not only is she admitting a dirty secret about her domestic life, she’s showing that it’s agonizing to admit it! Isn’t that a feeling shared by “millions of viewers”? Won’t this searing confession be a salve, or an epiphany, for anyone watching who has suffered from the same experience?



Or am I absurd, preposterous, the worst sort of navel-gazer, one who has taken the gazing so far that doing an ordinary, pleasant activity has become a reason for the worst kind of self-laceration, not to mention self-pity?

I've probably said should about ten times already in the last three minutes, and this is a lot about should, and on the train here this morning I was talking to a friend of mine and we were both talking about how, when you get to this age, you can know what you're supposed to do . . . and never do it. And what the fuck is it that makes you get up and do the thing instead of constantly talking to your friends on the phone and to your girlfriend and to yourself and writing in your journal about, like, "I should remember not to get too tired" and "I should remember not to be too angry," and I should . . . should, should, should, should, should . . . all the time! And then it's this constant feeling of failure. And . . . I don't know . . . I don't know what to say about that. Words of wisdom don't come, don't come.

A cop-out. That ending. And I knew it when I was saying it.

When I began to talk that day, I'm quite sure I wanted to know what I thought about the problem of should, and I assumed that talking aloud would force me to reveal those thoughts, when the camera was rolling. (Though, come to think of it, videotape doesn't roll, which is probably one of the many reasons why we use these contraptions so liberally as a tool for the unchecked confession. If we had a sense of rolling, we would certainly have a better sense of a beginning, end, and all the indulgent time in between . . . But I digress.) When the camera was humming in the perpetual present, I just said what I thought and then hit the wall of no more thoughts and instead of meeting that with silence, I did a little verbal dance of departure that let me off the hook.

At this point, you might wonder why I made this video, since everything I've said so far would suggest that the experience was worthy of nothing but the garbage can or the vault. I'd like to clarify. As I said in the intro, I find the genre of the diary film to be extremely problematic and embarrassing, but in the course of making this video I discovered that the problems were interesting rather than frustrating, and that I was willing and able to embarrass myself endlessly, so I felt compelled to continue both the shooting and, later, the editing in order to learn something about this troubled and troubling genre.

It's like we keep trying to understand what it is that we do that fucks us up, and keep trying to change it, and it just seems like that is nearly impossible. And I must say there is something deeply unfair about that. There's something . . . I mean, I don't believe in god, but whoever figured this out really



had a bad sense of humor, because . . . Here we all are, there are six billion of us now in the world, most of whom have jobs that don't pay enough, that make them miserable, that are boring, whatever . . . Um . . . have trouble in their families either because they have trouble with their spouses, or their kids are a wreck, or whatever, and it's like, okay, I was saying this to my roommate the other night and I said, "Probably 99 percent of the six billion are like that," and he said, "Well, maybe it's more like 90." So even if it's 90 percent, what is that? I can't do that math that fast, but that's a hell of a lot of people on this planet who, you know, invoke god every day, several times a day, that their life will be better, or play the lottery, or take drugs, or drink, or smoke, or . . . you know, cheat on their spouses. . . .

I had reached a point where I wasn't sure how to continue, wasn't sure what other subjects I could bring up that would elicit a dramatic emotional response—or even be of any interest. In other words, I wasn't sure I had anything of merit that would justify turning on the camera. But, having set the ball in motion, it was necessary to keep it rolling, so I made a somewhat desperate attempt by invoking the suffering masses. Not that I'm indifferent to the plight of the masses, but starting out with such a ridiculously minor set of concerns (My house is dirty! I bake too much!) made my discussion of the millions who toil away at exhausting, badly paid, demeaning jobs a dubious thing at best. Moreover—and this wouldn't be apparent to a viewer unacquainted with my daily life—I was saying all this while sitting in the comfortable, large office at my own place of employment, which is an Ivy League university. Hardly the stuff of human tragedy. But definitely the stuff of a confessional piece in which the maker/confessor starts to feel pangs of conscience about blabbing on and on about their aches and pains when the aches and pains of others are decidedly more to be considered.

There's an Emily Dickinson poem that I've always loved. I think it goes like this:

*To make a prairie it takes a clover, a bee and reverie.*

*The reverie alone will do if bees are few.<sup>2</sup>*

So, reverie . . . that seems to be a very hard thing to do. I don't know why . . . I guess a thought of a beautiful place leads to thinking about not being able to go there because I don't have money which leads to thinking about how I'm earning my money which leads to worrying about the students and worrying about how I'm going to grade them and worrying about whether they like me or not and then suddenly I'm worrying instead



of thinking about this nice place that I could go to. And instead of using the thought of it as a restful moment, it just turns into this panic attack!

So I think I have to stop because I'm going to go see a movie and dinner as part of my plan to do things that are fun . . . and hopefully I'll enjoy myself . . .

I didn't mind talking about this subject—my inability to be contemplative. It seemed pretty straightforward. One isn't contemplative, therefore one fails to find peace. One makes small efforts, one sometimes succeeds, and that allows for the possibility that one could succeed again in a future attempt.

What I failed to mention during my talking was that there was precious little reverie attached to the making of the video, to the process of turning on the camera and talking, and so what I failed to discover was how different the video would have been had I made some of those aforementioned small efforts.

And this is where we get into the impossibly convoluted problem at the heart of the confessional. By way of illustration, this problem is sometimes described as akin to being in a hall of mirrors. We start by attempting to look at ourselves, but we cannot do that directly, so we use indirection, reflection (sorry, no pun intended), and then that starts to seem like the thing we meant to be saying when in fact it's only a synonym or a kind of onomatopoeia. And I didn't even know I was doing that, so I couldn't backtrack and speak more directly.

Um . . . I suppose it would be great if I could think that I have a certain number of mannerisms and devices and, you know, values, uh . . . interests, whatever and I can just, you know, do variations on them, so it's not just a matter of like, you know, being a bad person and then trying to turn into a different person but instead think, well, you're a very . . . a very enthusiastic person and so sometimes that means you're manic and excessive and other times it means you're incredibly focused and appreciative and whatever. . . .

So it's just like this personality and then the different moments are variations on this personality all of which hold a certain interest or a . . . the way the *Goldberg Variations* do, um . . . but it seems instead it's like. . . .

Did I mention that all of these passages of text are excerpts from long recording sessions with myself? Reading the above makes that glaringly obvious. We are massively complicated beings. Not just those of us who have been in therapy for many years, but every one of us. We wonder, and wonder some more, and never quite know who's seeing



us, how we're being seen, or how to control either of those things. We hope to be one kind of person and sometimes discover we're something else entirely. I'm sure many of us would like to have our identity be a fixed, recognizable, and likeable thing, but I'm afraid that very few have the luxury of that experience. That was one of the ironies for me in using the Goldberg Variations — I relish the fact that a piece of music can be worked and reworked until it's a flawless expression of the beauty inherent in the varieties of life (i.e., of pitch, rhythm, and dynamics), but I also envy and resent that music can do so perfectly what we can never achieve in our perception of ourselves. So as I edited, I ricocheted quite uncomfortably between the vague, confused ramblings of my speech to the precise, articulate moments provided by Bach.

*(I'm on the couch holding up a copy of Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman)*

I've written on the frontispiece: "Nestled in the crook of my arm where the sweat creeps on a summer day." I guess I carried this in the crook of my arm where the sweat crept on a summer day (laughs) . . . Oh goodness . . . Oh, he's so direct. . . . Here's one, in a section called "By the Roadside," called "O Me, O Life!" . . . So much the sentiment of a twenty-year-old! I mean, I can imagine being twenty and reading this and of course, when you're twenty, you're, like, "Oh me, oh life!" I seem to be doing the same thing at fifty, but anyway . . . (Starts to read poem):

O ME, O LIFE

O me, O life! Of the questions of these recurring,  
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,  
Of myself, forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I,  
and who more faithless?)<sup>3</sup>

I had fun with this. I was at a point, again, when I wasn't sure what to talk about, but I had enjoyed referring to the Dickinson poem and, in thinking about my various formative experiences, I recognized that Whitman had played a significant role for me at an early age — an age when asking philosophical questions about my existence didn't seem quite as overworked or reworked as it does now. I had a little less fun with it when I started wondering whether or not I was invoking one of the great bards as a way to bolster my own musings. I mean, if Walt was writing stuff like that, why couldn't I say stuff like this? That didn't carry me very far, because of course he took his own experience and transposed it into poetry, while all I was doing was sitting on my couch reading aloud and commenting about myself. As if my version would have to be called, "O me! O me!"



It's really scary, it's really scary. . . . And what really is fucked about making a diary is that, you know, I come in here thinking, "Oh, I'm gonna do that," and then it takes me a good seven minutes or more to set up the equipment and I've gotten so preoccupied with the equipment that I've kind of forgotten my upsetness.

Then I start talking and I feel like, "Well, now I have to get back in touch with my upsetness so that this will be an interesting performance," and this is not about a performance. And then I get worked up to the point where I feel really upset, like now I'm saying it's really scary and it actually is incredibly scary and I feel like crying but then I think, "Well, now, if you cry that'll be good 'cause you'll be crying and that'll be really emotional and, you know, moving." But then I'm just doing it like a fucking *performance!*

And part of the problem . . . part of what is so fucked up is that I feel like most of life is about performing for people — it's like, being the nice teacher, being the good child, being the good parent, being the good lover, being the good neighbor, being the good citizen, you know, and probably a lot of, like, being bad is also performance, and my god, my god, I'm *sick* of it!

Well, there you have it. All the background noises finally came to the foreground and I could claim this as the moment when I was finally able to articulate the essence of the problem to which the video had been firmly pointing, and to which I have been repeatedly referring in this essay. However, I beg to differ with myself, because instead I see this as the most dishonest moment in the video. That's being very harsh, and I think that dishonest might not be the right word. It implies a moral judgment, and what bothers or interests me about this moment has nothing to do with ethics and everything to do with the nature of the camera — that intrusive, manipulative instrument which we think we use to express ourselves but which in fact uses us. I'm not getting into the paranormal here, I just mean that we're fools if we think we can use it without being used by it, which makes me want to retract my statement about the dishonest nature of the moment and assert that it was the most honest. If you think that means I'm reverting to my initial assessment, you're wrong. I still don't think I was articulating the essence of the problem, but rather that the camera created a moment that proved the impossibility of the pure confession, which means that the entire enterprise of the video would have to be called into question.

Shit . . . Somebody's here and I don't want them to overhear me . . . What am I going to do? . . . Oh . . . I think I have to wait a minute . . .



*(Interval with music)*

So it's, uh, ten to ten, and a little more . . . a little less than twelve hours ago I was sitting at the therapist's and I had the same feeling I had yesterday, which is that I just keep saying the same thing over and over again. And it just seems that there really must be a point that you reach where you can no longer say and do the same things again. . . .

But I don't know when that point is, and I don't know if I'm there, but it seems that the alternative is really grim, 'cause when you get to be fifty, you don't have that much time left, so if you don't do it as soon as you can, you might be fucked.

I'm playing for time here. I'm also somewhat repeating myself, although there is a place for repetition in an artwork, so that an idea, initially expressed moderately, can grow in power over time. Whether that's borne out in real life, as opposed to in a film or painting, is another matter. I think the opposite might be the case.

At least I like the fact that I'm finally saying what my fundamental concern is: that we repeat ourselves *ad nauseam* but at some point we're not allowed to do that anymore. But here's the rub: doing a confessional piece would lead the viewer to assume that there's some resultant catharsis or evolution—that in doing such a thing, the maker comes to terms with the problems being expressed, learns from that, changes, grows, whatever. . . . Not. And I was painfully aware of that even as I spoke those words to the camera. I “knew enough” to say that it was necessary, at the advanced age of fifty, to stop repeating myself, but I knew more, which was that I definitely wouldn't stop. This would suggest that I should have admitted the fact, but that wouldn't have the same dramatic appeal as this version, in which I express concern and hint at the possibility of a solution.

I wonder what it's like, you know, with parents 'cause they're always telling their kids what to do and what not do. . . . I'm sure it comes back to haunt them, um, or it comes back as a joke on them, and . . . I think when you're a teacher you get into the same position because you're constantly having to repeat what you supposedly know. . . .

My cat is, like, tearing up the couch . . .

What you supposedly know, and uh . . .

She totally, she distracted me . . .

So you're always having to tell the students what you supposedly know—I mean, that's why you got the job—because you know something like red doesn't look good on video or metaphors have to be handled carefully. . . . And I really, you know, I get to the point where I just hate saying



“Well, this is the way it’s done,” because I’m at the point where I think I don’t *really* know how it’s done.

I mean I’m not . . . I’m not saying I feel like a complete *idiot* or I’m going to jump off a bridge, but why can’t I use red? You know, why can’t I? Like, *red!* Blinding, mushy, hideous red, bleeding all over the screen, you don’t wanna watch it, you don’t get any information . . . You know, why the fuck *not?* I don’t know, but chances are when I’m. . .

Ugh. The self-referential moment: I make something with lots of red images and then talk about video’s capacity to show red.

I would have liked to avoid it, as I’ve always avoided it in the past, but I’d run out of steam. That’s not the same thing as having said everything worth saying, but there’s only so often you can say, “I don’t know what I’m doing,” and then you have to walk out the door. Exits can be more or less graceful; this one struck me as being on the lesser side.

On the other hand, this video wasn’t just a confessional piece. It was also a visual piece, one with very neutral visual moments (varying shots of my mid torso and that microphone) alternating with montages of a great variety of images of red objects that really didn’t refer to, or express all that much about, what was being spoken. To that extent, it was my pleasure to point toward that aspect of the video—to escape, for a moment, from the burden of talking about me, me, me.

(In the last segment of the video, as I peel off all the layers of red clothing I’ve been wearing, one hears snippets of the prior monologues. The first few moments are audible, but they quickly begin to overlap and soon the individual phrases can’t be clearly discerned. Then, at the end, one phrase jumps out. What follows are the first section and the last phrase.)

The daily labor . . . and, you know, I’m a woman, and I don’t overlook the fact that I think of doing all these things in light of being a woman, who . . . And we were both talking about . . . etc. . . .

. . . But then I’m just doing it like a fucking *performance!*

Which pretty much sums up my experience about making the video. For all that I wanted it to be a heartfelt, honest, probing account of my thoughts and feelings, I felt in the end that the whole video was “a fucking performance,” as is the vast majority of my life. So, when it comes to doing an autobiographical piece, that either means that I failed because I didn’t really get to “the real thing,” or I succeeded because I came around to admitting or recognizing that my “real thing” is putting on a show. And since I started this



essay by insisting that we can never know ourselves well enough to know whether we're speaking accurately about our experiences, then I'm left not even knowing whether my assessment about the video (as a performance) or my life (ditto) is correct. Which is at least knowing that I don't know, and perhaps that's better than thinking that I do.

*Goldberg Variations* segments in order of appearance with image notes:

Variation #1 (with opening montage)

Variation #7 (baseball catcher)

Variation #3 (pink ribbons flapping on sticks)

Variation #15 (construction site, pipes and plastic)

Variation #22 (man selling ices and counting dollars)

Variation #8 (cherry tree)

Variation #9 (robin)

Variation #29 (while poem is being read)

Variation #6 (red wall)

Variation #19 (boys, woman in park)

Variation #20 (Staples)

Variation #14 (undressing scene)

#### NOTES

1. *Seeing Red* script © 2005 Downstream Productions, Inc.; *Seeing Red* film (28 minutes, 2005), directed, shot, and edited by Su Friedrich, distributed by Outcast Films, [www.outcast-films.com](http://www.outcast-films.com).

2. "To Make a Prairie . . ." F1779 by Emily Dickinson.

The correct version of the poem is:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,

One clover, and a bee.

And revery.

The revery alone will do,

If bees are few.

3. "O Me, O Life!" from *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman.