


## The Work of Art as a Fictionalized Duplicate of Life: Boris Lehman's *Babel* film project in the Light of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*

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**Abstract:** Belgian filmmaker Boris Lehman has created what is surely the most ambitious film diary in the history of cinema, *Babel*, a twenty-four-hour film divided into nine parts and several appendices, which traces a sort of sublimated filmic duplicate of the author's life between 1983 and 2020. In *Babel*, Lehman painstakingly records the daily activities of his life: eating breakfast, walking, talking with friends, traveling, playing the piano, being evicted, looking for a job or paying his taxes. Despite the appearance of a realistic duplicate, the filmmaker claims for his film the denomination of "autobiographical fiction". How can we understand this mismatch between the everyday reality suggested by the film and the fictional will that the author proposes as a key to reading it? This article proposes to consider this fictional quality of Lehman's autobiographical project in the light of the aesthetic proposal crystallized in Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, which Gérard Genette proposed to call "autofiction".

**Keywords:** Boris Lehman; Marcel Proust; diary film; essay film; autofiction

### [es] La obra de arte como duplicado ficcionado de la vida: el proyecto fílmico *Babel* de Boris Lehman a la luz de la *Recherche* de Proust

**Resumen:** El cineasta belga Boris Lehman ha creado el que seguramente sea el diario fílmico más ambicioso de la historia del cine, *Babel*, una película de unas veinticuatro horas de duración dividida en nueve partes y varios apéndices, que traza una suerte de duplicado fílmico sublimado de la vida del autor entre 1983 y 2020. En *Babel*, Lehman registra minuciosamente las actividades cotidianas de su vida diaria: desayunar, caminar, conversar con amigos, viajar, tocar el piano, ser desahuciado, buscar trabajo o pagar sus impuestos. A pesar de la apariencia de duplicado realista, el cineasta reivindica para su película la denominación de "ficción autobiográfica". ¿Cómo entender este deslizamiento entre la realidad cotidiana que sugiere la película y la voluntad ficcional que plantea el autor como clave de lectura? Este artículo propone considerar esta cualidad ficcional del proyecto autobiográfico de Lehman a la luz de la propuesta estética cristalizada en la novela de Marcel Proust *En busca del tiempo perdido*, que Gérard Genette propuso denominar "autoficción".

**Palabras clave:** Boris Lehman; Marcel Proust; cine-diario; cine-ensayo; autoficción

**Summary:** 1. Prelude: The Resistance to Time. 2. Boris Lehman. 2.1. *Babel*: cartography of the autobiographical project. 2.2. *Babel*: auto-cine-biographical fiction. 3. Marcel Proust: *La Recherche* as autobiographical fiction. 4. Boris Lehman in the light of Marcel Proust. References.

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Carrying on with my life and filming it at the same time.  
My life has become the script of a film  
which in turn has become my life.  
—Boris Lehman (1991, min.42)

## 1. Prelude: The Resistance to Time.

At the beginning of his film *Oublis, regrets et repentirs* (Lehman, 2016), Belgian filmmaker Boris Lehman states:

Nothing extraordinary has happened in my life. I was not born deformed. I have not contracted polio. No bombs have been dropped on my head. I have not been in prison. I have not conquered the Himalayas. I have only fallen off a bike. Sometimes I've had a headache; some vomiting, a little fever. Nothing, I insist. A normal, anodyne, flat life. Some moments of joy, of happiness. A quiet life. (Lehman, 2016a, min.3)

And yet, Lehman, born in Lausanne (Switzerland) in 1944, has devoted his entire career as a filmmaker to erecting an immense filmic edifice that functions as a duplicate of that anodyne, flat life, an extraordinarily patient work of resistance to time, to death, to oblivion, a work of audiovisual fixation of the daily existence of a Brussels inhabitant between the 1980s and 2020s. What does Lehman film? The filmmaker himself answers in the tenth reel of *Mes sept lieux*: "I film the time I have left to live" (Lehman, 2015, min.7). And at the same time he films his friends, collaterally generating a duplicate of their existences, or a collective embalming on celluloid; one of them, Serge Meurant, writes, "I recognize with emotion most of the faces in his photographs and films. Some of our friends have died and Boris's films retain a living trace of them. I feel when I see them a sort of *tragic feeling of life*" (Meurant, 2013, p.159). Chantal Akerman states the same about him with regard to his patient two-year filming of the Béguinage neighborhood, soon after unrecognizable, in *Magnum Begynasium Bruxellense* (Lehman, 1978): "This film is a little bit our memory" (Akerman, 1985, p.44). This drive to delimit a territory between diary, essay and autobiography inscribes him in the line of filmmakers like Jonas Mekas, David Perlov, Anne Charlotte Robertson, Ross McElwee or Alain Cavalier, responsible for episodic diaries covering several decades, always from different thematic and authorial approaches. But Lehman's enterprise is surely, due to its extension, the most ambitious of all, and it is also the main one in proposing an original detour that overflies the whole of his diaristic proposal, differentiating and rarefying it: his insistence on underlining the fictional condition of his monumental autobiographical project, *Babel*. This insistence contradicts the aspect of banal everyday life that we see recorded on celluloid as he eats breakfast, bathes, converses in cafés, applies for subsidies or manages his taxes (Figures 1 and 2).



Figures 1 y 2. The fixation of everyday life on celluloid: *Babel. Lettre à mes amis restés en Belgique* (Lehman, 1991). Source: Screenshots.

And yet, Lehman explicitly qualifies this project as "autobiographical fiction" (Lehman, 2015, p.7), something that Robert Daudelin confirms when he writes: "To confuse the filmmaker with the character he created some thirty years ago is a serious mistake, however common and scandalously frequent" (Daudelin, 2015, p.125). For Lehman himself the key to his originality as a filmmaker lies, on the one hand, in this fictionalization that introduces a subtle distance between the person and the character and, on the other hand, by the collective way of working, as opposed to the more or less absolute solitude of the filmmakers cited above:

I must clarify that I do not work alone. It is very important to remember that everything happens through the relationship with others. David Perlov, I believe, used to work completely alone. Joseph Morder also takes care of everything. And as far as I know, I think that's the case with Alain Cavalier or Ross McElwee. My originality, therefore, consists simply in having turned the camera towards me. It is no longer a filmed diary in that sense, but fictionalization by means of the camera. And I act, like Charlie Chaplin, Nanni Moretti or anyone else. We immediately find a fiction: everything is framed, staged. There is a tripod, there is a director of photography, there is a sound technician. (Achard et al., 2021)

At the center of Lehman's entire cinematographic edifice, as the core of a hundred films made (see Lehman, 2023, pp. 316-321), is that ambitious project *Babel*, a film for which the filmmaker had foreseen a final duration of twenty-four hours, equivalent to the duration of a day of life (Leboutte, 2006), and which

finally lasts exactly twenty-four hours and three minutes, counting the nine parts that the filmmaker admits as a provisional structure in 2023 (Lehman, according to personal interview with the author in Brussels on June 24, 2023), although this duration is exceeded if we take into account the “satellite” films that the project has associated with it. Reading attentively through the images that weave the story of the ordinary life of a Belgian filmmaker, one can decipher the fiction that Lehman claims through a subtle series of detours between reality and fiction, with dream sequences, musical interpretations or anachronisms between what is filmed and what is commented years later in voice-over, which draw an overlap between life and work, merging and confusing both in a series of decisive questions about artistic creation, such as where life ends and work begins, what is spontaneous and what is invented or staged, or what criteria has motivated what to film and what to leave out. All of them are, in turn, central questions raised by what is surely the most ambitious and influential novel of the 20th century, Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, written between 1908 and 1922 and published between 1913 and 1927, a novel that increasingly duplicates and vampirizes the life and energies of its author, who walks steadily, page after page, toward the confusion between life and work, with the literal transcription, at times, and fictionalized, at others, of the everyday of the daily life lived, completed by the memories summoned. Lehman’s autobiographical project explicitly dialogues on several occasions with Proust’s work, even quoting extensive fragments of the books. Perhaps a closer look at the shadow cast by Proust’s novel on the *Babel* project could help to give some more or less definitive clue to its declared fictional condition.

## 2. Boris Lehman

### 2.1 *Babel*: cartography of the autobiographical project

Let’s start by organizing and describing this labyrinthine autobiographical project that has taken up half of Boris Lehman’s life, who has turned 80 years old in 2024. The *Babel* project as a whole forms a diary filmed between 1983 and 2020, with episodes released non-chronologically and sometimes overlapping years. In a permanent rewriting, Lehman’s *Babel* is structured today in nine films, often associated with a trip (Switzerland, Mexico, Canada or Ukraine) and/or one of his birthdays. Here are its nine parts: *Babel I / Lettre à mes amis restés en Belgique* (Lehman, 1991, 6 hours and 18 min.), with footage from 1983 to 1989, in which Lehman leaves for Mexico on the trail of Antonin Artaud’s trip to the lands of the Tarahumaras. *Babel II / Tentatives de se décrire* (Lehman, 2005, 2 hours and 31 min.), with footage from 1989 to 1995, centered on a trip to give a film workshop in Montreal. *Babel III / Histoire de ma vie racontée par mes photographies* (Lehman, 2002, 3 hours and 21 min.), with footage from 1994 to 2001, based on the confrontation of a photograph of Lehman as a baby with another photograph taken on the day of his 55th birthday. *Babel IV / Mes sept lieux* (Lehman, 2015, 5 hours and 23 min.), with footage from 1999 to 2010, which traces the aimless wandering of Lehman, “wandering Jew”, in Brussels after being evicted. *Babel V / Histoire de mes cheveux* (Lehman, 2011, 90 min.), with footage from 2003 to 2010, starting with a haircut and culminating with a trip to Lviv, his father’s childhood town, in Ukraine. In *Babel VI / Oublis, Regrets et Repentirs* (Lehman, 2016, 42 min., reel 6 bis of *Babel IV*), he proposes to his camera operator, Antoine Meerte, to film “a day in the life of Boris Lehman”. *Babel VII / Funérailles – de l’art de mourir* (Lehman, 2016, 98 min.), for the years 2010 to 2016, is a twilight film that starts from the mythical return of Ulysses to Ithaca to reflect on the twilight of life and on the possibility of filming our own death. *Babel VIII / Une Histoire de cheveux* (Lehman, 2009, 82 min., second part of *Babel V*), is an epic and ethnographic film, back to the Flahertian origin of the documentary genre; an almost abstract film of overwhelming snowy landscapes between Siberia and Mongolia, following Lehman’s hypothetical escape from the concentration camp in which he ended up imprisoned at the end of *Babel V*. *Babel IX / Fantômes du passé (comment l’histoire est entrée en moi)* (Lehman and Howe, 2020, 78 min.), co-directed with Sarah Moon Howe, has as its starting point two simultaneous events: a myocardial infarction suffered by Lehman on May 19, 2018, and the appearance of a huge crack in the wall of his studio; the film functions as a sort of Coda or recapitulation of the whole *Babel* building, with a ghostly Lehman, fragile in health, wounded in love, attacked by the deafening noise of the masonry works next to his studio, and who resists being filmed (Figures 3 and 4).



Figures 3 y 4. The gathering of diverse photographic images of the self and the others through time in *Tentatives de se décrire* (Lehman, 2005) and *Histoire de ma vie racontée par mes photographies* (Lehman, 2002). Source: Screenshots.



To these “canonical” episodes of the *Babel* project must be added at least four pieces inextricably linked to the project of autobiographical reconstitution: *À la recherche du lieu de ma naissance* (Lehman, 1990, 76 min.), in which Lehman returns to Lausanne, where he was born in 1944, to try to bring childhood memories to the surface and reconstruct the escape of his Jewish parents through Nazi-occupied Europe. *Homme portant* (Lehman, 2003, 58 min.), in which the filmmaker, a new Sisyphus, travels the world laden with his reels, bags and camera, culminating in the invention of an optical device that allows him to walk across the sky, before ending with a “video-portation” through the cathedral of Bourges. *Choses qui me rattachent aux êtres* (Lehman, 2010, 14 min.), an account of a series of objects from friends or strangers that end up making up a self-portrait. *L’art de s’égarer, ou l’image du bonheur* (Lehman and Legrand, 2015, 48 min.), co-directed with David Legrand and recorded in digital format after the theft of his film camera, in which Lehman wanders through natural or urban landscapes until he reaches Portbou, the place where Walter Benjamin ended his life in 1940 fleeing from the Nazis.

We should also mention, finally, some works in which Lehman develops a sort of oblique, specular self-portraits, among which two stand out: *Portrait du peintre dans son atelier* (Lehman, 1985, 39 min.), a portrait of the painter Arié Mandelbaum that ends up becoming a self-portrait; and *Mes entretiens filmés* (Lehman, 2013, 6 hours and 44 min.), a collection of interviews with crucial nonfiction filmmakers, from Jean Rouch to Jonas Mekas, which Lehman presents as “anti-interviews”, because they question the interviewee about Lehman’s own cinema, and which the author understands as “an ‘explanatory’ film of my poetic art” (Lehman, according to personal e-mail conversation of May 15, 2023).

## 2.2. *Babel*: auto-cine-biographical fiction

Some decisive clues about the fictional condition of the project appear when approaching the initial sketches for the film. In 1985, he explained that the idea had come to him at Waterloo in August 1975, and that his ideal choice of lead actor was none other than Orson Welles: in the film, Welles would flee from someone running up the stairs to the top of the Lion’s Mound in Waterloo, but a guardian would block his access (Lehman, 1985, p.59). Shortly thereafter, between 1978 and 1979 Lehman would write down in a notebook most of the ideas of what would become *Babel I*, making explicit the desire for a duration of twenty-four hours, and foreseeing a division into four six-hour parts. The film, Lehman wrote at the time, “mixes all genres and all cinematographic forms: documentary, advertising, tourism, musical, autobiography, family, comic, novel, melodramatic, ethnographic, historical, epic, dreamlike, experimental, etc.” (Lehman, 1985, p.59). These four planned parts would be titled, according to this initial plan, as follows: *Lettre à mes amis restés en Belgique*, *Des Étrangers à Bruxelles*, *Le Juif errant* and *À la recherche de mon temps perdu*.

The film will take a quite different course from that hybrid fiction that Orson Welles should have starred in, but the imprint of the acted approach – finally acted by the author himself – is spread all over the project, and the presence of all this meeting of genres can undoubtedly be verified, ranging from ethnography to the comic, with Lehman becoming a Chaplinian antihero, hopeless and vagabond, who enters the territories of the burlesque, including, of course, ample autobiographical fragments.

Throughout the final twenty-four-hour journey that is the (provisionally) definitive *Babel* of 2023, Lehman walks, cooks, eats, converses, hesitates, plays the piano, plays tennis, flirts, introduces films, applies for several jobs – sometimes successfully –, reads Seneca on the beach and travels by train or plane to places near and far. The film is his life, his life is a film. As Jacqueline Aubenas writes:

Boris Lehman is a man who says: ‘I never stop filming’. He belongs only to cinema and to himself, because his life, his friends, Brussels, the women he loves, food and Judaism are at the heart of his films. His films and their extensions: the letters, the meetings, the photos. With the deep sincerity of the autobiographer, a wide knowledge and a great cinematographic sense, he films, and the result is called a work. (Aubenas, 1992, p.48)

But the autobiographical film, in addition to recording reality, also intervenes in it, shaping it, altering it. Surely the decisive crisis point where Lehman’s film shows its fictitious seams most clearly is the moment in the first episode when the young female friends or lovers we have seen during the first five hours of footage reappear to bitterly reproach the filmmaker for the film’s representation of them. We then understand that Lehman had asked them to play a role, we do not know by what rules, in which they pretended false friendships or intense romances with the author; and the result of the viewing of the initial parts had seemed, to all of them, excessive and uncomfortable: “I don’t like it because it doesn’t reflect reality”, says one of them, Mara, to which Lehman replies “But a film is never reality”, and she points out “No, but regarding my relationship with you, it left me displeased” (Lehman, 1991, at 5 hours and 35 minutes of footage). The film, thus, thinks and reveals itself as fiction through this disconcerting self-incriminating reflection: the women have been made uncomfortable by a divergence of understanding of the filmic object; what for the filmmaker was a clear fiction, seems to them a form too close to documentary reality.

But even with this Brechtian distancing that opens a decisive crack in the film, the project as a whole does not cease to permeate an aspect of lived reality, where the author and character merge into one and the same figure. And it is here where it is worth asking how much the fiction created determines the aspect and conditions of the reality lived by the filmmaker. Film theoretician Alain Bergala understands all autobiographical filming as “part of a filmmaker’s strategy to act – through the presence of the camera and the consequences in the real of this filming – on his own life and his relations with others. Even to live something he

would not have lived, or not in the same way, without the pretext or the alibi of the film” (Bergala, 2008, p.29). This seems to be corroborated by Lehman himself when states:

(...) in *Lettre à mes amis restés en Belgique* is where the film is most confused with my life, because I was living the present of things that had been provoked by the filming itself. It was not a provocation; I wasn't going to film at Maggie's house, for example, nor was I doing anything I wouldn't have done without the camera. Not in that sense. But it was about living an instant with the camera, accompanied by the camera. And it's true that the camera changes things a bit, but it also reveals things. (Achard et al., 2021)

Or later, in the same interview:

In my case, of course, it's about living another life, but there's more to it than that: cinema helps me to live. I wouldn't have let myself be dragged into certain adventures without the camera, I wouldn't have carried out those attempts. The camera gives me a certain power, a certain audacity, a certain courage. But at the same time – I have to say it – it also limits me, it imprisons me a little. I wonder what I will do if I don't make films anymore. Cinema is very important in my life, even if I feel it's something insignificant; both things are valid, even if it's somewhat contradictory. (Achard et al., 2021)

Bergala also establishes a subtle distinction in method between the written and the filmed diary, which has far-reaching consequences; in the first case, Bergala explains, the writer writes his diary a few hours later, generally at the end of the day, and rarely reworks it afterwards; the filmmaker, on the other hand, perhaps because of the excess of ontological synchrony between what is lived and what is filmed, Bergala continues, will rework what is filmed some time later through voice-over or montage: “through this secondary reworking, the two concatenated moments (capturing and editing) build a specific perspective, more or less accentuated, through which most of the filmed diaries end up approaching autobiography” (Bergala, 2008, p.31). As I noted above, Lehman explicitly calls the *Babel* project “autobiographical fiction” and stresses: “filming is more a reflection on my way of living than a simple reportage on my life” (Lehman, 2015, p.7). At the beginning of the fourth part of *Babel* he calls it “Fiction auto-ciné-biographique”, connecting with the idea of an article by Hadelin Trinon with the same title published in 1985, “Autocinébiographie”, which cited among other films, a first draft of *Babel* (Trinon, 1985, p.21). This conscious expansion towards fiction, beyond the strictly documentary content, becomes clearer than ever with the first of the aforementioned additions, *À la recherche du lieu de ma naissance*, which organically precedes all the episodes of *Babel*: the whole film is crossed by possible reconstitutions of his scarce memories and impressions of his childhood in Switzerland with his parents. These fictions cover decisive autobiographical gaps that Lehman is anguished not to have been able to film, a suffering for the “lost time” not preserved on film, which he will explicitly verbalize in *Oublis, regrets et repentirs*: having had to stop filming for seven months after the theft of his camera, he refers to this time lapse as a “black hole” (“trou noir”) in his narrative (Lehman, 2016, min.1). In his attempt to create as complete a duplicate of his own life as possible, the filmmaker expands the frame of what he has strictly been able to film of himself, reaching the initial and final limits of his own life, where it would be impossible for him to film himself. Thus, he first films his own birth – with the surrogate image of filming a friend giving birth in *À la recherche du lieu de ma naissance* (Lehman, 1990, min.46), followed by a circumcision according to the Jewish rite –, and he will end up staging his own death, with a sunny and festive funeral – including a funeral prayer supervised by himself –, in *Funérailles (de l'art de mourir)* (Lehman, 2016, min.45) (Figures 5 and 6).



Figures 5 y 6. The filming of one's own childbirth and death in *À la recherche du lieu de ma naissance* (Lehman, 1990) and *Funérailles (de l'art de mourir)* (Lehman, 2016). Source: Screenshots.

In his article dedicated to autobiography in film, from 1987 – that is, immediately prior to the making of *À la recherche du lieu de ma naissance* – the decisive theorist of written autobiography, Philippe Lejeune, reflects on the subtle difference between the veracity of written and filmed autobiography:

Autobiographical cinema seems to be condemned to fiction (...). I cannot ask cinema to show what has been my past, my childhood, my youth, I can only evoke or reconstitute it. Writing does not present this problem, because the signifier (language) has no relation to the referent. The written childhood memory is as much a fiction as the reconstituted childhood memory in cinema, but the difference is that I can believe it and make it true when I write it down, because language borrows nothing from reality. In cinema, on the other hand, the inauthenticity of the artifact becomes perceptible because, ultimately, a camera could also have recorded, in another time, the reality of what is here represented by a simulacrum. (Lejeune, 2008, p.18)

Difference from which he draws revealing conclusions about the impression caused by one form or the other:

The “superiority” of language is due, then, to its capacity to make us forget its fictional part, rather than to a special aptitude to tell the truth. Cinema has the disadvantage of being able to be documentary, the image being always linked to a reality. That child whom I make play my childhood, that adult to whom I delegate my role, those scenes that I reconstitute, are not the reality they pretend to be. (Lejeune, 2008, p.18)

Between the rituals of beginning and end, between childbirth and funeral, Lehman’s camera tries to envelop with its gaze everything that has to do with one’s own life filmed in the present, which obviously involves the body – dressed and naked, photocopied, covered with celluloid, bathed, massaged – (Figures 7 and 8), eating habits – with a preference for sugar and caffeine –, conversations with friends or administrative procedures, but also including that which is inside the body itself and to which we do not have access: in the first episode of his *Babel*, Lehman will end up filming the inside of his body with an internal camera introduced through the mouth during a gastric exploration in the hospital (Lehman, 1991, min.300). This drive to reach the narrative and visible totality of his object of study, which is himself, must undoubtedly be connected to the project of Michel de Montaigne (“I myself am the matter of my book”, Montaigne, 1828, p.XII), which in turn culminated the classical incitement of the temple of Apollo at Delphi, the famous “know thyself” (Pausanias, p.417). But in my opinion, the writer who sheds the most light on Boris Lehman’s work and intentions is Marcel Proust, and the considerations sketched on the latter’s work can therefore be of maximum benefit to reflect on the successes or limitations of this Belgian filmmaker’s cinematographic contribution, in his declared construction of an “autobiographical fiction”.



Figures 7 y 8. Metaphors of the body, photocopied and burned, in *Tentatives de se décrire* (Lehman, 2005) and *Funérailles (de l'art de mourir)* (Lehman, 2016). Source: Screenshots.

### 3. Marcel Proust: *La Recherche* as autobiographical fiction.

In his work, Proust takes the concept of the novel to the extreme, erecting a torrential and inexhaustible literary edifice that only closes when his own life ends. For Proust, once he had found the aesthetic key to the book – which was first an idea for an essay, to become a new type of novel –, it is unthinkable and impossible to stop writing, to stop translating his life into literature, mobilizing for this purpose all kinds of fictionalization and structuring resources, in a permanent formal search for balance, symmetries and resonances with the change of sexes with respect to their real referents, or the synthesis of several real characters in a single fictionalized one. His theme, summarizes Antoine Compagnon,

(...) is the story of a life, from childhood to adulthood, told in the first person by a nameless narrator (...). But this story is singular, it is the story of a writer’s vocation: and its story is circular and is told from the end of the story, where the hero becomes a writer and starts to write the book that the reader has just read (...) (It) is above all a search for truth, a philosophical novel that responds to an aesthetic doctrine: art is not equivalent to life, it transcends it, because it is the true life; the creative self is not the social self, the artist creates by descending into himself (...). (Compagnon, 1988, pp. 8-9)

When the first volume of the *Recherche* appeared, some critics attacked Proust for including in an overwhelmingly meticulous and indiscriminate manner even the smallest of details of his daily life. In the



prestigious *Nouvelle Revue Française*, the critic Henri Ghéon wrote that Proust's every sentence "tends a sort of indefinitely extensible net, trawling over the ocean floor of the past, collecting all the flora and all the fauna at once" (Ghéon, 1988, pp. 615-616). He was convinced that Proust's novel did nothing more than dump directly into his book everything that had passed in front of his eyes at some point, in a sort of anti-creative and exhausting challenge. Ghéon dwells on a specific example, the long description of the stained glass windows of the church of Combray, and on the casual figure of a woman that Proust places in that church:

Here is the firework of images and annotations that will arouse a stained glass window and Mr. Proust will not even spare us Mrs. Sazerat with her box of cookies; it is enough that he remembers having seen her once in church! And who is Mrs. Sazerat? A bit player, of whom we shall hardly ever hear again. But it would seem to Mr. Proust that he is lying if he failed to include her fortuitous presence. (Ghéon, 1988, p.616)

In a letter of reply, Proust reacts against this reading of his work as a storehouse of data from reality accumulated and transplanted directly into the book, giving a decisive clue to the fictional condition of the whole project:

You think I am talking about Mrs. Sazerat because I cannot omit that I saw her that day, but I have never seen her! (...) With the passionate and clairvoyant hours that I have spent over the years at the Sainte Chapelle, at Pont-Audemer, at Caen, at Évreux, and by piecing together the impressions I had received, I have reconstituted the stained glass window. I put Mrs. Sazerat in front of it to accentuate the human impression of the church at that hour. But all my characters, all the circumstances of my book have been invented in order to make them mean something. (1988, pp. 619-620)

Decades later, with more perspective, Gérard Genette subtly analyzed a dedication from Proust to Madame Scheikévitch – where he gave her a preview in 1915 of the continuation of the story after the first volume and the overall plan for the complete novel – and drew conclusions about its mismatches between fiction and non-fiction, and about the obstinate presence of the author's real self in the story. Genette writes:

(...) the fact is that Proust's spontaneous movement always tends to identify with him (or to identify him with himself), even if he retracts in an ambiguous or partial way and without consequences for the work, as in his 1921 article on Flaubert: "...the pages in which some 'Madeleine' crumbs, dipped in an infusion, remind me (or, at least, remind the narrator who says I and who is not always I) of a whole period of my life, forgotten in the first part of the work." One can see that the corrective parenthesis does not prevent Proust from continuing with a first-person possessive that is decidedly irrepressible. (Genette, 1989, p.323)

These revealing accidents lead Genette to conclude that the best term to denote the authorial status of the *Recherche* is the famous term invented in 1977 by the writer and critic Serge Doubrovsky for his book *Fils*: "autofiction". Doubrovsky explained the term thus at the beginning of his book: "Autobiography? No. (...) Fiction of strictly real events and facts; if you will, autofiction, of having entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, outside the wisdom and syntax of the traditional or new novel" (Doubrovsky, 2001, p.3).

An adventure that would be summarized, according to Genette's interpretation, in the formula "I, author, am going to tell you a story whose protagonist is me, but which has never happened to me" (quoted in Musitano, 2016, p.106), and which is opposed to autobiography because of its deliberate instability, as Jorgelina Corbatta explains: "unlike autobiography, which seeks to rediscover the unity of the story and the uniqueness of the self, autofiction can only express itself through the fragment, the rupture, the discontinuous and simultaneous" (Corbatta, 2009). Adventure, moreover, which, in Julia Musitano's opinion, is indissoluble, as for Doubrovsky, from the psychoanalytic experience, so she defends safeguarding that space of ambiguity that allows a glimpse of the real, and that would be the final key to the territory of autofiction, within a proposal of opposition between memory and recollection:

This conception of the fictional character of the writings of the self – how far is it referential and how far is it fictional, when does an author lie and when does he tell the truth about himself – seems, at least, reductionist, and lets us lose sight of something that so many theorists consider the essential of literature, which is its uncertain or enigmatic character. That is to say, the main hypothesis is that what dominates in autobiography are the references of memory, of synthesis; as opposed to autofiction, which offers a weakening of the organizing and totalizing force of memory and an empowerment of recollection. (Musitano, 2016, p.115)

#### 4. Boris Lehman in the light of Marcel Proust.

The *Babel* project, like the *Recherche*, has been built by asymmetrical pieces in a permanent state of re-composition and readjustment, of endless writing that synchronizes life and work. Lehman, like Proust, has dedicated the essential part of his artistic work to patiently manufacture that duplicate, a filmic mold of his own life – fictional but ultimately real, made possible by filming –, a creative enterprise of excessive ambition in which everything that enters the semantic field of the self fits, from the most public to the most intimate, in an attempt to exhaust the circumstances that surround the daily existence of a human being of our days. Both inexhaustible and torrential projects present an approach to the circular structure: in the case of Proust, with the final encounter of the narrative technique of the book he is about to start writing, and which is none other than the one that begins on the first page of the first volume; in the case of Lehman, with the return in *Babel VII* to the place of origin of the project, the Lion's Mound of Waterloo where he filmed the first shot for the first film, and to where his funeral procession is headed in a film that, at least in one of the organizations proposed by the filmmaker, closed the cycle (Figures 9 and 10).



Figures 9 y 10. Circular structure of the *Babel* project marked by the return to the origin, to the Lion's Mound of Waterloo: *Babel. Lettre à mes amis restés en Belgique* (Lehman, 1991) and *Funérailles (de l'art de mourir)* (Lehman, 2016). Source: Screenshots.

In both cases, there is an explicit work of fictionalization from a real lived base: if in Proust some enclaves or persons pass into the book with a simple alteration of names or sexes – the Grand-Hôtel de Cauburg as Hotel de Balbec, or Alfred Agostinelli as Albertine Simonet – in the case of Lehman, the author and his inner circle – for example his friend Joseph Morder (Desjardins, 1997, min.12) – do not fail to remind us that behind the appearance of everyday spontaneity there is a permanent work of staging that brings *Babel* into the realm of fiction. In the case of Proust, these changes do not alter the flow of the writer's real memories, which at some points lead to the writing of pages that can be read as a literal diary of Proust's mourning for Agostinelli's disappearance. The fictionalizing force is such in the case of the Frenchman that the real region that inspired the description of Combray, Illiers, has since 1971 been called Combray-Illiers. In an article on the disguises of the self in Proust's work, Leo Bersani writes about the Proustian way of fictionalizing the past, in a way that could be applicable to Lehman's cinema:

From the moment he begins to live it as literature, the world of Marcel's past becomes a fiction that only stages himself: and yet this dramatization of himself is so broad that it appears to us as an adequate framework in which the world can fit. In fact, Marcel does not at all give us the definitive version of his life. The fact that in describing the world he gives it the form of an almost allegorical reflection of his own imagination diminishes the limiting force of reality on his life. (Bersani, 1980, p.28)

This seems verifiable in those parts of the *Babel* project in which Lehman thinks about his remote, prenatal past, such as the trip to Lviv in *Histoire de mes cheveux* (Lehman, 2011), the Ukrainian city where his father spent his first twenty years, or in *Fantômes du passé* (Lehman, 2020), where he attempts to place moments of personal history within the larger context of the collective history. And perhaps it is even more evident in the external pieces of the project, such as *À la recherche du lieu de ma naissance* (Lehman, 1990), where he tries to put images and narrative to his birth and early years. This one is undoubtedly the filmmaker's most Proustian film; in it he tries to activate childhood memories, but only to confirm what Proust had already announced in his book: that memories activated voluntarily are nothing more than false shadows without creative value; only memories activated by involuntary memory can trigger a flow of sensations that transport us to the longed-for place, enclosed until then in an object, sound, gesture or image. This is what Proust emphasized in a 1913 interview:

For me, the voluntary memory, which is above all a memory of intelligence and vision, only gives us back false faces of the past; but when a smell or a taste found in very different circumstances awaken in us, in spite of us, the past, they make us feel how different that past was from what we thought we remembered, and that our voluntary memory painted, like bad painters, with colors without truth. (...) I believe that the artist should claim the raw material of his work only from involuntary memories (...) they give us back things in their exact dose of memory and oblivion. And in short, as they make us taste the same sensation in such different circumstances, they free it from all contingency, they present it to us in its extratemporal essence. (Bois, 1988, pp. 612-613)

In all his films, Lehman films his life in the present tense, except in this one, where he films something he can no longer film: his childhood. This film symbolically covers that void of memory of the early years – not filmed or even remembered –. The whole film has an obvious Proustian vocation, from the title itself; the filmmaker wants to force the landscapes, images and objects of his childhood to activate memories, but the film proves that Proust was right: memory cannot be forced to release a true memory, only involuntary memory can give us back an instant lived in all its splendor. The conclusion, therefore, is that the filmmaker must recognize at the end of the film that he has found nothing of what he went looking for: "I wonder if I have really come to Lausanne. No, I haven't. Have I found what I was looking for? No, I haven't found anything." (Lehman, 1990, min.72)

There is a whole thread of possible connections between writer and filmmaker, from structural ones, such as Judaism – from which both draw cultural information to rework in their creative work –, to occasional ones, such as different strategies to escape the deafening noise of the works in adjoining buildings – opium, in

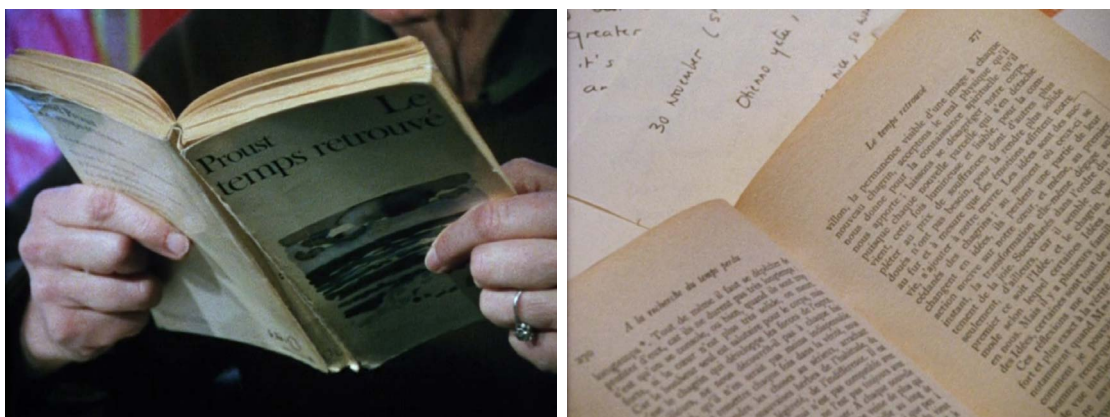


the case of Proust (2021, p.927, note no.1 for p.147), soundproofing helmets with classical music, in the case of Lehman (*Fantômes du passé*, Lehman, 2020, min.30) –. But more explicitly, the reworking of Proustian materials and concepts runs through Lehman's work, at such decisive points as that aforementioned final chapter, foreseen as early as 1985, with an explicitly Proustian title: *À la recherche de mon temps perdu*. This project was finally altered between 2011 and 2016, leaving out the explicit allusion to Proust from this final part of *Babel*, but in what was once the geometric center of the project, three hours into the third film, *Histoire de ma vie racontée par mes photographies* (Lehman, 2004, min.187), he will devote ample space to Proust, with the close reading of extensive fragments chosen from the final book of the *Recherche*. In that sequence, a reader friend reads the fragment in which the narrator affirms that the work of art is the only means to recover the Lost Time, as the culmination of a film explicitly dedicated to think the time of a complete life, from childhood to the present – the day of his 55th birthday –, a life organized in images, where each photograph is required, in one way or another, to function as a madeleine or a tile to release involuntary memories. Lehman's accomplice friend reads:

And then, though no doubt less luminous than that which had made me intuit that the work of art was the only means of recovering lost Time, a new light dawned upon me. And I understood that all those materials of the literary work were my past life; I understood that they had come to me, in frivolous pleasures, in laziness, in tenderness, in pain, stored by me without my guessing their usefulness, or even their survival, just as the seed puts in reserve all the food that will nourish the plant. Like the seed, I could die when the plant had developed. (Proust, 1954, p.262)

And among other excerpts, the reader also chooses a famous one, which undoubtedly functions as a *mise en abyme* of the operation that the filmmaker himself has just carried out with respect to his reading of photographs of beloved faces, many of them disappeared from his life or from the earth, and which could be applied to all his images not only photographed, but also filmed throughout his ambitious *Babel* project (Figures 11 y 12):

All those beings who had revealed certain truths to me and who no longer existed seemed to me to have lived a life destined only to be of use to me; it seemed to me as if they had died for me. (...) a book is a great cemetery where in most of the tombs the erased names can no longer be read (Proust, 1954, p.266-267).



Figures 11 y 12. The reading of the last book of the *Recherche* in *Histoire de ma vie racontée par mes photographies* (Lehman, 2004). Source: Screenshots.

In the presentation text he had written to apply for grants, Lehman had already referred to this Proustian substratum of his film: “It is not really a film about art, about Boris Lehman's photographs. Rather, it is a film of reencounter and knowledge through photography. A Proustian itinerary of reconstruction of a past where the inevitable nostalgia will blend with the idea that I have of happiness” (Lehman, 1995). The centrality of Proust in his filmography is confirmed by the fact that Lehman closes one of his first films, *Portrait du peintre dans son atelier* (Lehman, 1985, min.36), with another extensive quotation from Proust, with a text that functions as a reflection on the whole autobiographical project that Lehman was beginning at that time to raise with the first stones of his cinematic *Babel*: “A person is a shadow to which we will never have access, for which there is no direct knowledge, about which we get different ideas with the help of words and actions, both of which only give us, in the end, insufficient and contradictory information” (taken non-literally from Proust, 2021, p.122). Finally, this persistent shadow of the author of the *Recherche* on Lehman's filmography is confirmed by himself in an interview made in Barcelona in 2021, from which I transcribe an excerpt:

My procedure always consists of recalling, a bit like Proust. Searching, searching for lost time. That's what I do in all my films. You start with the details, with the small memories. I try to film the present, but as the years go by, it soon becomes the past. I try to capture things. And it's very difficult, because the present escapes you. It's gone right away. You have to be very attentive, and film very fast. There is no

time. I don't have time to wait to find the money to shoot and produce a film. In classic cinema it takes a long time to make a film. (Araújo, min.4:43)

What to do with all this insistent series of allusions? What reading keys does the assumed and declared presence of the Proust universe at the heart of the *Babel* project liberate for us, and how does it allow us to think of the whole cycle as a project of fabrication of a fictionalized duplicate of life? Perhaps the final key to this *contamination* of explicit and implicit signs of the writer's work in that of the filmmaker is provided by one of the most lucid analysts of Proust's work: Roland Barthes. In his article "Parallel Lives", Barthes studies with his usual subtlety the distance between Proust's life and work, their intertwining, their resonances. He clearly sees from the outset the relationship between Proust's work and the autobiographical genre: "it is the account of a life that goes from childhood to writing, so that Marcel and his narrator are like those heroes of Antiquity, which Plutarch paired in his *Parallel Lives*" (Barthes, 2020, p.13); but for him the key lies in the inverse reading of all biography: "we do not find Proust's life in his work, *but we find his work in Proust's life*" (Barthes, 2020, p.14). And from this perspective he can therefore evaluate in a new way the biography of Proust written by George Painter: "To read Painter's work (...), is not to discover the origin of *In Search of Lost Time*, it is to read a duplicate of the novel, as if Proust had written the same work twice: in his book and in his life" (Barthes, 2020, p.14). His overall conclusion on this relationship between life and work, therefore, is that "it is not life that shapes the work, it is the work that radiates, that explodes into life and disseminates in it the thousand fragments that seem pre-existent to it" (Barthes, 2020, p.15).

Is it possible to decipher from these coordinates the relationship between the life and work of Boris Lehman, to perceive the distance between reality and fiction, to understand the structure, the search for a style of his own, the attempt to exhaust the vital duplicate transformed into a monument to the common human being of the late twentieth century, with his weaknesses, his failures, his evictions, his preference for sugar and caffeine? Barthes ends his article by suggesting that Proust's life and work form two open planes, which come together at an exact point: writing. Barthes writes:

Marcel's and the narrator's lives constitute two planes open to the dispersion of the same essences, but what is no longer parallel between these two planes, because it is unique, imbricated, identical, is writing: this is where the parallels meet. When Marcel locks himself in his cork-lined room, he does so in order to write; when the narrator says goodbye to the world (at the Guermantes matinee) it is so that he can begin his book. That is to say, only at that moment do the two parallel lives indissolubly unite their durations: the narrator's writing is literally Marcel's writing: there is neither author nor character, there is only one writing. (Barthes, 2020, p.16)

This is surely the final key with which Lehman's "autobiographical fiction" must be read in all its complexity: coexisting on two parallel planes, author and work are constantly resonating in a constant exercise of modeling everyday life, and only at the exact point where the operator begins to film Lehman do these two planes end up coinciding. The film, therefore, will be the mosaic resulting from the selection and organization of a series of selected tesserae in which life and work coincide, and which, when we see them continuously on a movie screen, end up resulting, as erroneously as Ghéon's reading of Proust's novel, in an impression of real life transcribed unaltered by the author on celluloid. The *Babel* project, read in this way, becomes denser, and releases some of its enigmas in a revealing way, perhaps making way for new ones (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Boris Lehman in front of his celluloid *Babel* in his farewell shot to the act of filmmaking, in *Funérailles – de l'art de mourir* (Lehman, 2016). Source: Screenshots.

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