THE LITERATE VOICE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DOCUMENTARY: TOWARD A LOGOLOGY OF THE MOVING IMAGE

By

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To my family
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THE LITERATE VOICE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DOCUMENTARY: TOWARD A LOGOLOGY OF THE MOVING IMAGE

By

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The Literate Voice of Autobiographical Documentary investigates the relationship between autobiographical documentary and grammatology, the history and theory of writing. I trace the concept of voice back to its literary origins to introduce the notion of literate voice in documentary practice. The evolution of writing corresponds to the invention of graphical devices intended to indicate how words communicate once distributed into the world. Like alphabetic writing, documentary films attempt to represent the world in the pursuit of rhetoric—documentary distinguishes itself from document through its capacity to structure the realm of nature in a particular way. Charting the literate voice of autobiographical documentary provides a way to study how personal experience enables the negotiation of philosophical and political concepts. Most significantly, the literate conception of voice indicates documentary filmmaking as a form of discourse: voice escapes the status of a record or representation of the spoken voice. However, literate voice does not signify a text’s meaning, point of view, or narrative authority—it establishes an author’s motives. I map the patterns in documentary cinematography, mise-en-scène, and editing to reveal the entelechy, or ideal conceptual perfection that motivates all documentary filmmakers. By mapping the dialectical, negative, and hierarchical structures in moving images, a filmmaker’s attitude or stance toward reality materializes.
My dissertation proposes a logology of the moving image modeled from Kenneth Burke’s reading of Augustine’s *Confessions*. While Burke’s logology outlines how words generate rhetoric, my project charts the persuasive visual elements of autobiographical documentary. I analyze the films of Ross McElwee to demonstrate how documentary moving images produce conceptual discourse. For example, I show how McElwee’s literate voice in *Time Indefinite* performs the concept of mortality through shot composition, framing, editing structure, and narrative organization. While *Time Indefinite* explicitly recounts the death of McElwee’s family, I argue that its formal structure also demonstrates the concept of mortality at work. The goal of my project is not to conclude what the visual elements of documentaries mean, but to show what they do and suggest how they inform logic and action.
In James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Frank crushes Nick’s skull with a wrench and then prepares to drop his corpse over a five hundred foot cliff. As Nick lies dead on the front seat of a car, his killer douses the murder weapon with wine to mask any trace of blood. Frank next pours the rest of the alcohol over Nick’s lifeless body and carefully places the cracked, empty wine bottle inside the automobile. Frank and his lover, Cora, soon realize tipping the car over the high cliff may arouse suspicion from the authorities. If they tell the police they went over the edge with Nick, how could they have survived the crash? They reposition the vehicle and push it down a smaller ravine, watching it plummet fifty feet below. After they slide down to the wreckage and carefully survey their tracks, Frank begins to tear Cora’s blouse. He rips her “wide open, from her throat to her belly.”¹ The narration that follows this passionate exhibition reveals Cain’s aptitude for descriptive writing. Nowhere else in *Postman* does Frank’s voice so eloquently express his sadomasochistic rage as raw sexual hunger:

> I hauled off and hit her in the eye as hard as I could. She went down. She was right down there at my feet, her eyes shining, her breasts trembling, drawn up in tight points, and pointing right up at me. She was down there, and the breath was roaring in the back of my throat like I was some kind of a animal, and my tongue was all swelled up in my mouth, and blood pounding in it. . . . Next thing I knew, I was down there with her, and we were staring in each other’s eyes, and locked in each other’s arms, and straining to get closer. Hell could have opened for me then, and it wouldn’t have made any difference. I had to have her, if I hung for it. I had her.²

Frank’s narration illuminates how Cain’s arrangement and choice of words reveals more than plot exposition. Words such as breath, breasts, roaring, throat, animal, tongue, swelled, mouth,

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² Ibid.
blood, pounding, straining, closer, hung, and hell suggest the dramatic motives of Cain’s writing during the 1930s and 1940s: obsessive passion and animalistic desire leading to violence. In Cain’s *Double Indemnity*, Walter and Phyllis “[snarl] at each other like a couple of animals” after they murder H. S. Nirdlinger.³ Cain employs similar verbal action during the climax of *Mildred Pierce* when Mildred’s “breathing [becomes] heavier, as though she were an animal” shortly before strangling her daughter Veda.⁴ In these examples, Cain’s symbolic pattern occurs during moments when characters violently turn on their loved ones—they indicate a shift toward the animalistic. All use figurative language and word patterns that exemplify the descriptive elements of writing.

Raymond Chandler once stressed the value of descriptive writing in a 1948 letter to Frederick Lewis Allen. In the letter, Chandler highlights aspects of literature not obvious to many readers such as tone, word choice, perspective, sentence structure, and organization:

> A long time ago when I was writing for the pulps I put into a story a line like “He got out of the car and walked across the sun-drenched sidewalk until the shadow of the awning over the entrance fell across his face like the touch of cool water.” They took it out when they published the story. Their readers didn’t appreciate this sort of thing—just held up the action. I set out to prove them wrong. My theory was that the readers just thought they cared about nothing but the action; that really, although they didn’t know it, the thing they cared about, and that I cared about, was the creation of emotion through dialogue and description.⁵

The descriptive elements of prose contribute to a particular notion of authorial voice, one often synonymous with style. For many, finding the voice of a text amounts to detecting stylistic traits linked to an authorial presence, a fixed point of origin. Although Chandler claims that style is

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what readers really care about, *literate voice*, signified by the act of writing, serves a purpose beyond creating emotion through dialogue and description. Voice is not just a mnemonic or stylistic device; it also represents a mode of discourse. Literate voice engages the devices of style, rhetoric, and grammar to create a persona or tone that expresses motivation, or what J. L. Austin calls illocutionary force.\(^6\)

While some may associate voice with a meaning or point of view that precedes the act of writing, I suggest the conceptual origin of voice and Self corresponds to the development of literacy. Writing is voice. To assume a literate understanding of Self involves the desire to control how one’s words signify to others through writing. The evolution of writing, from a mnemonic practice into a complex discourse, corresponds to the invention of graphical devices intended to indicate how words communicate once distributed into the world. Most significantly, the literate conception of voice indicates writing as a form of discourse: voice escapes the status of a record or representation of the spoken voice. However, literate voice does not signify a text’s meaning or narrative authority—it establishes an author’s motives and illustrates the illocutionary force of writing. Once we take note of how an individual’s language shifts into strategic or stylized written structures in the context of culture, we may most efficiently negotiate the Self as a mode of inquiry.

The historical evolution of writing reflects the dilemma of how to control the expression of Self: what kinds of devices best represent graphically what cannot be determined with certainty in writing? Literate voice emerged as people used devices to try to preserve authorial expression in writing. Writing, or creating any visual text through competency with scripts, brings language to consciousness and plays a significant role in turning words into discourse.

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David Olson argues writing does this “by first turning words and propositions into objects of knowledge and secondly by turning the force of an utterance—the issue of intentionality—into objects of discourse.”

Prior to the late Middle Ages, voice most often meant the spoken voice. Writing began as a mnemonic practice to record the physical voice, but literary systems later developed graphic means (syntax, lexicons) to express words as concepts. This move toward writing as representation provided a model for the structure of spoken language. My project suggests writing serves as a model for speech, as well as filmmaking, not the reverse. Words become subjects of philosophical and political reflection through writing.

Literate voice emerged from the concept of literal meaning. The shift from writing as a mnemonic device to discourse corresponds to the history of how scripts evolved to signify intention. The Christian Bible governed the discourse of early Western literary practices, and spiritual interpretation superseded literal understanding. While Augustine suggested the spirituality associated with a text depended on the letter, or literal meaning, he provided no method for its appraisal. In the twelfth century, Hugh and Andrew of St. Victor developed a systematic approach to interpretation that advanced the historical meanings of texts. However, both church fathers never questioned the subservience of literal meaning to the spirituality of scripture. The notion of literal meaning as a textual form conveying an author’s audience directed intentions appeared in the thirteenth century with Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa*

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8 Ibid., 76.

9 The brief history of literal meaning I provide here summarizes a more detailed account offered by Olson in *The World on Paper*, 143-159.
Aquinas’s notion of literal meaning granted autonomy to texts from spiritual dogma. However, he still believed absolute meanings originated from God. For Aquinas, literal meaning conveyed what human authors intended when they spoke of events orchestrated or authored by the divine being.

It remained unclear what texts said or what they literally meant until the late medieval period. Until then, word and meaning indicated the spirituality associated with the Christian Bible—to interpret meant to recover the spirit of scripture. Finally, in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther identified literal meaning as autonomous representations of author directed intention. Luther conceived that texts could speak for themselves without the authority of the church. However, his insistence that texts could be read correctly, and with certainty, proved questionable. Nevertheless, his practice of reading texts according to their formal properties provided the basis for the modern idea of literal meaning.

Since writing cannot capture illocutionary force, it must compensate for this deficiency. Olson suggests this lack contributes to the significance of writing. If writing fails to express intention, textual analysis then requires new interpretative discourses to determine how an utterance communicates. In other words, literate voice serves an epistemological function. Once we understand language as discourse, we can identify the general properties of writing systems and how they inform rhetorical structures. However, literate voice can only signify an attempt or desire to communicate because it can never convey absolute meaning.

The notion of writing as discourse involves the desire to capture the attitude or expression of a speaker by graphic means. After Luther, voice became a literate concept—the written voice

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11 Olson, 266.
indicated discourse instead of the spoken voice or the spirit of a divine creator. Literate voice adopts a self-consciousness and signifies representation of Self rather than historical reality. By explicitly marking expressions through graphical means, texts achieve the status of discourse.

The visual elements of moving images, including cinematography, mise-en-scène, and editing, cannot impart illocutionary force or authorial motivation as absolute meaning. Instead, these elements control expression through lexical and graphic devices. Most Hollywood films induce transparency; their command of the invisible style and collaborative modes of production often make the recovery of illocutionary force difficult. Audiences often are not aware of a film’s source material, the details of a screenplay or treatment, or a director’s notes on a shooting script. Some mistake the audible voice (voice-over, monologues) or the style of a director as the singular voice of a text. Eventually, visual conventions developed to manage the illocutionary force of moving images, just as the rules of grammar evolved over time with the use of graphic and lexical signifiers.

The literate Self perhaps most explicitly materializes in autobiographical texts, and many autobiographical works committed to film and video originate in the realm of documentary. Autobiography is a genre that foregrounds the act of writing, or the process of writing one’s life as literate expression. Most documentaries appear to offer a more pronounced indexical connection to the historical world than Hollywood films, and this causes many to overlook their rhetorical construction. Close analyses of the rhetorical form of documentary pales in comparison to work employing other critical frameworks. Many analyses of documentaries

12 Ibid., 277.

13 The most widely read text on close readings of documentary films is perhaps Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Slonowski, eds., Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video, new and exp. ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014). However, many of the essays in the volume do not address the relationship between documentary form and rhetoric.
focus on *what* rather than *how*. Furthermore, some scholars writing about autobiographical documentary subgenres such as the essay film, the personal diary film, the self-portrait film, and the first person documentary tend to generalize the notion of Self. They assume the Self automatically materializes through reflexive devices like voice-over narration or the direct address from the image of a physical body. Some forget that voice is a metaphor of Self and does not signify a narrative authority, perspective, or meaning that precedes the act of writing. No one ever physically speaks in a film, so how can voice represent anything other than writing? The question of how the Self endures in autobiographical documentary is the same question as how literate voice persists in moving images. This question leads to an appraisal of the rhetorical structures of moving images.

I trace the concept of voice back to its literary origins to identify how the cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, and editing of autobiographical documentaries construct literate voice. Autobiographical documentaries contain patterns that demonstrate sociopolitical and philosophical concepts filtered through the expressions and contradictions of the author/subject. As a result, the formal elements of these films convey a notion of Self as simultaneously a product of authorship and the conventions of cultural discourse. The goal of my project is not to conclude what the visual elements of films mean, but to reveal what they do and uncover how they inform logic and action. Literate voice operates as the expression of Self in the moment of encounter with cultural discourse.15

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The evolution of literacy and the expressive Self provides a starting point to explore how documentary filmmakers write. The literate voice of moving images endures beyond the transfer of dialogue from literary source materials, subtitles, title or credit sequences, and newspapers headlines in montage sequences. While adaptation studies scholarship highlights these more obvious examples of literate voice, less prominent instances subsist in the conceptual structures of moving images. The study of these implicit displays requires a method. Developing this method begins with examining literate voice through the visual elements of autobiographical documentaries to determine a principle of intelligibility of texts. These visual elements include shot composition, framing, set design, lighting, perspective, performance, editing structure, and narrative organization. Studying literate voice leads to analyzing style and structure, or how particular elements incorporate features such as gesture, tone, dialogue, movement, timbre, and pace. Charting the literate voice in documentaries requires close attention to patterns that viewers watching a film or video for the first time may not recognize. Before discussing the specifics of my dissertation’s method in Chapter Two, the remainder of this chapter serves a pedagogical function: to trace the development of voice from its literary origins to its presence in the autobiographical documentary.

**Literary Voice-Over: The Literate Voice of James M. Cain**

The spoken, audible voice differs from the expression of literate voice. Likewise, words and images originate from distinct sign systems. Words fall into Charles Peirce’s category of *symbols*, or modes in which the relationship between representamen and interpretant is arbitrary—the relationship must be learned. Images belong either to the category of *icon*, in which the signifier bears a graphic resemblance to the signified, or *index*, where the relationship

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between the signifier and signified exemplifies a direct, physical relationship.\(^{17}\) Although poststructuralist theory has largely debunked semiotic readings of films over the last forty-five years, the intertextual, semiotic relationship between words and images informs how moving images communicate in unique ways.

Roland Barthes’s concept of *anchorage* establishes that words secure particular understandings of images and vice versa.\(^{18}\) Barthes describes an *Amieux* advertisement depicting food containing ingredients not easily identifiable. The caption below the image reads ‘*rice and tuna fish with mushrooms*’, allowing for a specific level of perception of the ad. Barthes then proposes the notion of *relay* to explain the coexistence of word and image in the cinema.\(^{19}\) In the relay-text, word and image stand in a complementary relationship, both part of a syntagm where the unity of the message arrives at the level of story, anecdote, or diegesis. Voice-over works in this way; dialogue does not anchor the image like in the *Amieux* ad, but works to produce meanings not found in the image alone. Both concepts clarify that words and images work in tandem in semiotic systems, neither providing a more objective or natural representation of concepts.

Literary voice-over in film noir represents one example of literate voice. Most often, the translation of hard-boiled prose into voice-over narration offers a subjective account of events removed from the action unfolding directly on screen. However, literary voice-over serves as only one of several examples of literate voice in moving images. Other explicit illustrations,


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 41.
including written letters, titles, signs, subtitles, and intertitles, are well documented in scholarship. However, not all voice-over signifies literate voice. In documentaries such as The Thin Blue Line (Errol Morris, 1988), voice-over culled from spoken witness interviews does not indicate literate voice. While instances of literate voice appear in many forms, not all express the Self as directly as literary voice-over.

The prose style of Cain provides a useful way to illustrate literary voice-over as an example of literate voice in the cinema. The Postman Always Rings Twice has been adapted seven times to the screen. Cain’s literate voice endures in all of Postman’s film versions, but perhaps more explicitly in the most well-known adaptation of the book: Tay Garnett’s 1946 version starring John Garfield as Frank and Lana Turner as Cora. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer bought the rights to Postman in 1934, but the property lingered in stasis for twelve years because MGM feared its content would violate the guidelines of the Motion Picture Production Code adopted in 1930. Production moved forward in 1944 following the success of another Cain film adaptation: Billy Wilder’s Double Indemnity for Paramount.

Garnett’s Postman adapts recognizable aspects of literate voice and elucidates a clear association with its model’s prestige. The film’s title sequence, after all, perpetuates the Classic Hollywood cliché of running the opening credits over a shot of a source novel. Most significantly, Garnett’s film is the only version of Postman to use voice-over to replicate Cain’s


21 The Postman Always Rings Twice’s cinematic adaptations include Le Dernier Tournant (Pierre Chenal, 1939), Ossessione (Luchino Visconti, 1943), two American adaptations in 1946 (Tay Garnett) and 1981 (Bob Rafelson), Szenvedély (György Fehér, 1998), Buai laju-laju (U-Wei Haji Saari, 2004), and Jerichow (Christian Petzold, 2008).

22 Thomas Leitch, Film Adaptation & Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 158.
literary style. However, the voice-over narration in Garnett’s *Postman* constitutes literate voice through its connection to Cain’s writing, not because of its spoken delivery. We can trace Frank’s voice-over narration back to Cain because the character’s words originate directly from the source material.

During the 1940s, Hollywood films used voice-over more often than in later decades, especially in film noir (e.g. *Laura* [Otto Preminger, 1944], *Double Indemnity*, *The Mask of Dimitrios* [Jean Negulesco, 1944], *Murder My Sweet* [Edward Dmytryk, 1944], *Gilda* [Charles Vidor, 1946], *The Killers* [Robert Siodmak, 1946], and *Out of the Past* [Jacques Tourneur, 1947]). Film noir demonstrates Hollywood’s explicit attempt to incorporate literate voice. Audiences seldom encountered first-person narration in films of the 1930s, but critical successes like *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) and *How Green Was My Valley* (John Ford, 1941) exposed viewers to voice-over early the following decade. While the use of voice-over in Hollywood films declined in the 1950s and 1960s, its presence during the 1940s helped distinguish noir’s style. That only Garnett’s version of *Postman* includes voice-over indicates the

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23 The earliest films to incorporate voice-over include Alfred Hitchcock’s second all-talkie *Murder* (1930) and Rouben Mamoulian’s *City Streets* (1931).
prevalence of first-person narration during Hollywood’s classical noir era between 1941 and 1958. However, while all 1940s Hollywood film versions of Cain’s noir fictions (*Double Indemnity*, *Postman*, and *Mildred Pierce* [Michael Curtiz, 1945]) incorporate voice-over, many other canonical film noirs of the period do not. For example, the adaptations of Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946) and *The Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947) omit the narration of their literary models.

Voice-over narration has been a topic of debate in scholarly writing on novels and films since the late 1950s. Some critics have suggested film’s inferiority to novels and make no effort to censor their distaste for voice-over, claiming it fails to capture the essence of prose. Brian Henderson insists that while film narrators expose the devices of narrative in classical cinema, “they are ludicrous stand-ins for the novelistic ‘I’ because, though they wind up elaborately, they have nothing to pitch.”²⁴ Henderson’s remark proves difficult to substantiate. Film voice-over owes much to other art forms besides the novel, such as theater and radio. In addition, the political aspects of voice affect its ability to convey particular facets of source material. For example, feminist and queer revisionist adaptations are not usually concerned with preserving the spirit of canonized literature. Scholars who consider words and moving images in terms of institutional prestige neglect how writing persists in moving images.

Other critics suggest voice-over alters the semiotic makeup of the image. Eric Smoodin concludes that the establishment of a voice-over narrator transforms an entire film into a linguistic event.²⁵ Smoodin’s suggestion that icons and indexes suddenly operate as linguistic

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²⁴ Brian Henderson, “Tense, Mood, and Voice in Film (Notes after Genette),” *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (Summer 1983): 17.

symbols seems to miss the fundamental semiotic distinctions between words and images. J. P. Telotte suggests a more involved process: films containing narration from the point of view of a single character (like Postman) “mark our privileged access to a consciousness, to a world of memory and thought that is far more detailed and vivid—if potentially more colored by the imagination—than any simple linguistic utterance.”

Although Frank alone provides voice-over in Garnett’s Postman, his infrequent commentary hardly allows detailed or privileged access. Voice-over narration occurs for 149 seconds or about two percent of Postman’s running time of 113 minutes. Another question comes to mind: if Frank were a documentary subject reading a personal letter in voice-over, would he provide a more privileged access to his consciousness? My initial thought is no.

Noir voice-over typically communicates both the authority and doubt of a protagonist’s interpretation of events. Voice-over in noirs also often originates via a dead narrator, “whether literally as in Sunset Boulevard and Laura, metaphorically as in Detour, or virtually as in Double Indemnity.” Frank’s commentary proves inconsistent in the film. In Cain’s novel, Frank narrates throughout, but Garnett’s film includes only nine instances of voice-over, all occurring before or after shot transitions (e.g. wipes, dissolves). Frank’s voice-over in the film offers explanatory support for establishing shots and does little to regulate our perspective. Although we identify with Frank, his cinematic voice-over functions much differently than in the book.


In the novel, Frank’s life appears ordered by fate, an outlook aligned not with his character, but with an implied author. However, in the film, Frank’s speech represents his own outlook. He initially claims Cora’s sexual prowess leads to his downfall, but in the film’s final moments, Frank blames his and Cora’s deaths on fate. The film’s strategy first delivers a point of view through a centralized character, but then defuses it, separating the spectator’s identification with both Frank and the implied author. We identify as an addressee throughout the majority of the film, but at its conclusion, a priest, Father McConnell, emerges as the subject of Frank’s address. The novel’s ending instead reveals Frank’s narration as a written account of events, later given to a priest. So why does Garnett’s Postman include voice-over narration if it sets up a false addressee and only appears a handful of times to aid the exposition of establishing shots that do not require the assistance? The answer: to preserve the literate voice of James M. Cain.

While literary voice-over serves as one example of literate voice in film, my project’s primary objective is to demonstrate how the visual elements of autobiographical documentaries shape epistemology—to show how literate voice works to construct conceptual structures.

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informed by both authorship and cultural discourse. However, negotiating this process first requires an understanding of the conceptual genealogy of voice in literature and film. As the next section demonstrates, not everyone has the same ideas about what voice and Self signify in writing.

**Literary Voice**

Poststructuralism’s critique of author-centered structures in the late 1960s ended the reign of literary voice as expressive Self. However, there are instances when maximizing the expressive Self results in productive outcomes, such as the representation of underrepresented minority authors. The expressive Self’s vehicle represents its tenor as synecdoche—part for whole. Expressivity suggests that retrieval of the tenor remains possible through voice. Critics of the self-isolated subject propose that alterity, the state of being other, plays a role in subjectivity; in other words, the self-isolated subject is a myth. If “[u]tterance is on the borderline between at least two consciousnesses where all dialogic discourse takes place,” then the intentions of the self-isolated subject account for only part of the equation.\(^\text{30}\) While literate voice takes account of expressivity, it signifies motivation, not meaning. Analyzing how the construction of one’s writing could be interpreted differs significantly from locating intention or authorship as a source of meaning.

In the wake of poststructuralism, several ideas developed to explain the force of the utterance. These approaches often reacted to theoretical developments or political ideas and attempted to account for the voice’s position between expressivity and alterity. Jacques Derrida’s *différance*, for example, indicates the Greek *middle voice*, “it precedes and sets up the opposition

between passivity and activity.” Derrida explains that différance resembles neither a word nor a concept, thus adhering to poststructuralism’s dismantling of binary oppositions. Barthes adds that middle voice immediately positions the author alongside the act of writing, the utterance effecting and affecting the writer at the moment of enunciation. Regardless of criticisms that suggest middle voice merely collapses distinctions upheld by transcendental signifieds, clarifying how different texts speak results in productive understandings of cultural genres. For example, middle voice lends itself well to the analysis of the prose style of modernist literature.

Scholars advocating a de-centering of authorial structures soon realized that social codes alone could not determine the force of the utterance; expressivity must play some role. The notion of the speaking subject perhaps remains the most recognized poststructuralist concept of the utterance. It reflects the dialogic relationship between the speaking agent and the spoken, or the multiplicity of meanings and slippages contained in a single utterance. Julia Kristeva politicized the speaking subject in a series of essays in the late 1960s and early 1970s, continuing a dialogue began by Roman Jakobson and Emile Benveniste. Drawing on the ideas of Bakhtin, Hegel, Marx, and Freud, Kristeva describes semanalysis as a signifying process, rather than a static system. The speaking subject is not entirely an expressive Self, yet, its utterance is not completely removed from the intention of the speaking agent. Meaning arrives when the self-isolated subject’s utterance enters into a relationship with the constantly shifting play of

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signifiers inherent in a network of social utterances. Semanalysis possesses the potential to subvert established beliefs, and for Kristeva, the productive qualities of language originate from its heterogeneous nature.

Donald Wesling and Tadeusz Slawek recognize that any productive theory of voice will support a relationship between expressivity and alterity. They seek “a logic of integration which would deliver a human subject not held captive by the limitations of a discredited philosophy of consciousness.” For them, filling the gaps involves considering regional intentionality:

Because we can no longer say “within the bubble of consciousness of the biographical individual,” and yet, until we reach the furthest limits of avant-garde decentering and of electronic networking, we still refer to intention and agency, making assumptions about the social and other placement of person, of voice, knowing we can never finally specify a single place.

Wesling and Slawek propose the *syncopated subject*, a discontinuous identity formation originating from Martin Heidegger’s work on intentionality and consciousness. The syncopated subject functions as a sign of the Self, incorporating the role of Other to rethink the Cartesian Self—it refuses the subject-exclusive alignment with either expressivity or alterity. The regional component of the subject refers to its fluctuating nature as a form of anxiety. Region describes its transparency.

Post-humanist efforts that abandon subject/object, human/inhuman, or natural/artificial oppositions offer some variety to the expressivity/alterity debate. Cyborgs, animals, and

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34 Wesling and Slawek, 2.

35 Ibid., 11.


machines often work as tropes to illustrate destabilization in many post-humanist approaches. In other words, a subject becomes animal or machine because it subverts traditional structures aligned with conventional modes of understanding. Although many post-humanist approaches effectively question the notion of expressivity, the most productive ideas recognize the apparatus shift from literacy to electracy currently underway. How can we embrace developing modes of digital technology if we continue to rely on literate models for teaching and research? Could examining how the expressive Self renovates in the digital age through electrate texts offer more useful results than substituting one literate mode for another? While many scholars recognize the speaking subject, syncopated subject, and middle voice as alternatives to the expressive Self, most have yet to adopt a method accounting for electrate expressivity. Until the academy fully embraces experimentation as an approach to pedagogy and publication, some appraisals will remain similar to the methods they seek to reinvent. Most likely, an experimental model will have to embrace the furthest limits of avant-garde decentering and electronic networking as Wesling and Slawek suggest. Until then, the question of how to locate Self or voice persists in the digital age.

Much theoretical writing on cinema exhibits symptoms of analyzing films in the service of theory. Some analyses ignore formal composition and instead stress how content reinforces external theoretical generalizations. Often, these approaches neglect how moving images are written in distinct media platforms; they struggle to recognize films are not the same textual objects as video installations, CD-ROM comic books, or digital novels. An episode of Mad Men

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does not require the same critical approach as Peter Tscherkassky’s *Outer Space* (1999).

Initiating theoretical analyses with medium specific close readings often leads to valuable appraisals of texts. A productive method for the study of literate voice must bridge the gap between formal analysis and theory to illuminate how media specificity plays a crucial role in the rhetorical and conceptual structures of moving images.

Considering the abundance of scholarship on literary voice, the lack of work on cinematic voice in relationship to writing or literacy is surprising. Most published essays and a few books primarily address the audible voices of actors. These studies evaluate on-screen and off-screen voices, embodied and disembodied, in relation to space, narration, and theoretical frameworks such as psychoanalysis. Many of these resources address the relationship between voice and film by pointing out mimeses of literary devices: tense, point of view etc., or illustrating representations: intertitles, close-up shots of words in books and signs.

**The Voice in Cinema**

Much has been written on film voice-over, dialogue, and audio narration, especially through the lens of feminist theory. The most cited work remains Mary Ann Doane’s psychoanalytic account of voice in relationship to the fantasmatic body and space. Doane’s “The Voice in the Cinema” represents one of the earliest attempts to decipher the theoretical

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function of sound in relationship to image. The essay describes the classical cinema’s presentation of an imaginary body, one that spectators attribute either to characters or to films as a whole. Films construct a fantastic visual locale that spatializes the audible voice. The voice that we hear relies on its connection to the visual body for acceptance. The most valuable part of the essay evaluates forms of diegetic sound in relation to space including lip-synching, voice-over, voice-off, and interior monologue. Doane ultimately associates the pleasure of hearing to a reimagining of Lacan’s mirror-phase as an acoustical reflection-phase. Like much pioneering psychoanalytic work on film, the essay does not consider the effects of cinema removed from infantile experience.

Thomas Kavanagh’s “The Middle Voice of Film Narration” represents an anomaly: an early essay on voice and cinema without explicit reference to sound. Kavanagh incorporates Benveniste’s work on language to explain how the “actor’s film” exceeds the narrative binaries of character/situation, actor/action, and encounter/reaction. The presence of actors such as Clint Eastwood, Jerry Lewis, and Charles Bronson operates as the subject of middle voice in these films. Kavanagh explains, “the actor in the ‘actor’s film’ exists, paradoxically enough, not through his actions, but within his being.” Obstacles, such as enemies, appear as depersonalized entities and register as spectacle; they serve as products of the actor’s presence. Therefore, narrative elements in these films function solely because of the actor’s presence as both agent and patient simultaneously.


44 Kavanagh, 58.
Kavanagh published “The Middle Voice” in 1979, well before most film scholars applied poststructuralist theory to cinematic voice. Although his essay offers several interesting points, it leaves some questions unanswered. Does the middle voice of film narration respond to most star personas, or only certain actors? If so, how can we identify stars from non-stars? Does stardom have to do with financial success or critical acclaim? What about reading the essay today, when Charles Bronson as “Bronson” makes far less sense to younger viewers? How does the entire diegesis of a film respond to a star persona if the film contains several stars? Kavanagh’s essay might benefit from a closer engagement with how cinematography, mise-en-scène, and editing affects narration in films like Death Wish (Michael Winner, 1974). Offering specific formal details of how an actor’s presence manifests on the screen provides a far more convincing argument than describing the literal “Bronsonizing” of a film.

Like Doane, Kaja Silverman’s The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema addresses the ideological function of sound vis-à-vis psychoanalytic theory. However, Silverman considers the implications of both sound and literary voice. She explains how male or institutional control refuses the female voice authority in Hollywood cinema by tying the audible voice to bodily images through synchronization. Disembodied voice-over in Classic Hollywood, a privileged speaking position outside the diegesis of a film, almost never features a female narrator. A Letter to Three Wives (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1949) is the only exception in Silverman’s analysis, but even the disembodied female narrator of Letter is linked to corporeality through her photograph; she becomes the object of the male gaze.

Although the bulk of The Acoustic Mirror details how soundtracks construct sexual difference, the book’s last chapter provides a useful assessment of filmic voice and authorship.

By carefully analyzing “The Death of the Author,” Silverman asserts who speaks matters and refutes Barthes’s indifference toward the authority of the male-defined author.\(^{46}\) Although she does not wish to restore the author as the source of meaning (nor do I), Silverman does suggest directors, most importantly female directors, may “constitute one of the speakers of his or her films, and that there may at times be pressing political reasons for maximizing rather than minimizing what might be said to derive from this authorial voice.”\(^{47}\)

Drawing on Peter Wollen’s work on auteurism, Silverman describes the author “inside” the film produced by the text (e.g. the structures we call “Hitchcockian”). This “inside” author projects the author “outside” the film, the biographical person.\(^{48}\) Silverman suggests filmic materiality constructs authorial subjects much in the same way it formulates viewing subjects. Her examples, including Hitchcock’s cameos and Liliana Cavani’s cross gender identification with the male characters in her films, reveal the director as a speaking subject. *The Acoustic Mirror*’s use of literary theory considers both the audible voice and literary voice to offer a concept of voice removed from an exclusive relationship to sound.

While most writing on cinematic voice negotiates the audible voice, efforts that engage literary theory often reduce voice to modes of narrative address, or how films mimic writing. Bruce Kawin’s outline of film voices, for example, offers a taxonomy of narrative modes detailing how films reveal story and plot like books.\(^{49}\) Although Kawin’s brief article operates partly as a response to Brian Henderson’s essentializing view of film narration published one


\(^{47}\) Silverman, 202.


year earlier, voice as written expressive Self remains absent from the discussion. Several influential monographs emerged around the mid-to-late 1980s that elaborate on cinematic voice and narratology. However, these works neglect a few points: literary voice exists as metaphor, writing persists in all moving images, and no one ever physically speaks in literature or film.

Work on literary voice often confuses hearing the written voice as a physical phenomenon, the word made flesh. Much writing on cinematic voice insists the audible voice somehow legitimizes a human origin of meaning. In perhaps the most thorough essay on voice in film and literature, Andrew Gibson argues theory has sought to restore a human presence to the written voice when none exists. Scholars assume textual voices offer the same process of signification as a spontaneous human event. Gibson reminds us the literary voice is a metaphor, and ignoring its metaphorical status positions voice as a fixed point, or idealized center. He calls for a materialism of voice and proposes the Derridean concept of spectrality to enable a deconstructive conception of voice. Writing is interior to voice—it is never contained. If voice often signifies a false presence, Gibson asks how we can think of voice as non-presence, a point between real and unreal.

Gibson acknowledges that writing haunts the cinematic voice, placing it somewhere between human and machine. In an impressive analysis of three books, he identifies the contradictions in dominant thinking about the cinematic voice. First, he suggests Sarah Kozloff

50 Henderson, “Tense, Mood, and Voice in Film (Notes after Genette).”
51 These include David Bordwell’s *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), and Kozloff’s *Invisible Storytellers*.
52 Andrew Gibson, “‘And the Wind Wheezing Through That Organ Once in a While’: Voice, Narrative, Film,” *New Literary History* 32, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 639-657. Surprisingly, Gibson’s essay is practically nonexistent in citations on the voice and cinema. Even the most “high profile” mention of the essay merely identifies it as one of several texts that address the inaudible and unspeakable forms of voice. See Edward Branigan’s “Soundtrack in Mind,” *Projections* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 60.
confuses writing and voice in *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film*. Kozloff connects the origin of voice-over narration with the intertitles in D. W. Griffith’s films, yet she cannot think of writing apart from a meaning that precedes voice. She does not realize that writing is voice. Gibson then criticizes David Bordwell’s attempt to distance voice from enunciation and metaphor in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, revealing the contradiction in Bordwell’s privileging of image over sound while exposing his reliance on metaphor repeatedly. Despite Bordwell’s wish to get away from metaphor and promote narration as a set of cues perceived by the viewer, his use of terms like *editorial intelligence* and *fabula* conjure metaphor directly. Gibson ends his analysis with backhanded praise for Michel Chion’s *The Voice in Cinema*, the book that introduced the acousmatic voice to film studies, a voice whose source cannot be seen.\(^{53}\) The immaterial nature of the acousmatic voice plays into spectrality. For Gibson, Chion understands how film may be thought of as a lack or non-presence.

Documentary studies has frequently offered deconstructive and flexible models of cinematic voice that refuse to promote an exclusive relationship to sound or insist on a fixed point of meaning. However, in many autobiographical documentaries, authors directly engage the camera/viewer and lead many to interpret their direct address as their point of view. Ignoring the metaphorical status of literate voice cuts analysis off from epistemological inquiry. I suggest the literate voice of autobiographical documentary is not a voice that precedes the act of writing or filmmaking. Instead, it signifies the Self as a mode of inquiry, caught between authorship and cultural discourse in a multistage process of enunciation. Much of the construction of literate voice takes place in the editing stage, when an author has to decide what scripts/images and patterns to employ as the literate representation of the physical Self.

Documentary Voices

Academic writing on documentary prior to the mid-1980s typically neglects the rhetorical strategies of moving images. Instead, early books and essays on documentary mostly provide biographical sketches and interviews with filmmakers. One of the first comprehensive attempts to organize documentaries by historical and ideological function appears in Erik Barnouw’s *Documentary: A History of the Non Fiction Film* in 1974. Barnouw categorizes filmmakers according to the political and stylistic trends of the past century and sketches how nonfiction films persuade and inform. The book reveals patterns in films seemingly estranged from one another by language and sponsorship. For example, Barnouw offers the term “Prophet” to characterize both those who invented technology (e.g. Eadweard Muybridge, Thomas Edison, Auguste and Louis Lumière) and those who developed narrative conventions (e.g. Georges Méliès, Edwin S. Porter).

Bill Nichols was among the first to consider how documentaries construct arguments in the early 1980s. “The Voice of Documentary” marks Nichols’s initial attempt to articulate what would become his six modes of documentary. The essay’s wide influence has prompted investigation into how documentaries construct social points of view and how overlapping patterns in film style contribute to a particular notion of voice. While Barnouw’s taxonomy draws on historical tropes, Nichols analyzes documentary’s sociopolitical elements through the


rhetorical structures of formal patterns. The essay establishes four styles of documentary film (later expanded to six documentary modes) to establish how texts construct social points of view. Nichols analyzes film form to determine how documentaries speak through an interaction of codes rather than a singular feature or audible voice. For example, the observational mode, epitomized by the films of Frederick Wiseman, often presents the illusion of unprovoked reality. Observational documentaries tend to elicit a reading that favors the personal over the political because they mimic the invisible style of Hollywood fiction through a dramatic structure. These films employ “found” stories rather than the invented stories of Hollywood.

Nichols explains how readings of observational films can ascribe historical or indexical meaning to moments that appear as unprovoked observation. Such readings forget that editing and mise-en-scène affect rhetorical structures. He identifies a moment in Soldier Girls (Nick Broomfield & Joan Churchill, 1981) when the political becomes personal: Drill Sergeant Abing begins to confess his experience of Vietnam to Private Hall. Broomfield and Churchill never try to convince us of how to feel through their audible voices; their film contains no spoken commentary. Instead, Soldier Girls employs classical narrative procedures of persuasion: a cause-and-effect causality to resolve conflict and a dramatic organization of shots that only acknowledges the camera as participant-observer near the film’s conclusion. According to Nichols, these procedures narrow the gap between fabricated realism (argument) and indexicality (evidence). In other words, “we may think we hear history or reality speaking to us through a

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film, but what we actually hear is the voice of the text, even when that voice tries to efface itself.”

Nichols’s documentary modes do not resemble most theoretical models because they refuse to generalize the effects of films to illuminate larger, often unrelated concepts. Nor do they function as a poetics of documentary; they do not fall in line with neoformalist discourse. Instead, the modes provide a framework to study the politics and aesthetics of films that allows for slippage and modification. They have remained relevant because of their pertinence to both formal analysis and film theory. Regardless, some scholars have called for their revision. Overeager critics insist that documentaries rarely, if ever, conform to one mode completely. These detractors disregard that modes overlap and interact. Others have called for a model that reflects emerging trends, but such proposals usually have a hard time supplying a clear, useful method of practice. Stella Bruzzi suggests Nichols’s documentary modes are outdated and create a “deeply exclusive and conservative” canon. She attempts to develop a dialectical relationship between what she calls “groundbreaking” films and more established documentaries. Unfortunately, her idea of innovative documentaries includes those by canonical filmmakers like Nick Broomfield, leaving her desire to chart new terrain unfulfilled. Bruzzi also overlooks that each documentary mode pertains to films that have become essential to feminist, queer, and postcolonial studies. Nichols’s modes may reflect several perspectives, but none of them are best described as conservative or exclusive.


Following Nichols’s lead, Carl Plantinga offered a taxonomy of documentary voices in the late 1990s that assesses the narrative authority of films. He proposes three voices identifiable by their formal structure: formal voice (characterized by epistemic authority), open voice (distinguished by epistemic hesitance), and poetic voice (marked by epistemic aestheticism). These voices attempt to relay the broad purposes of form rather than work through the structures of historically distinct eras or movements. However, Plantinga’s model offers only slight revisions to Nichols’s modes. The formal voice and open voice categories bear a striking resemblance to the expository and observational modes respectively. The formal voice explains the world to the viewer; it teaches and explains. For Plantinga, Robert Gardner’s Dead Birds (1962) exemplifies the formal voice, using titles and omniscient narration to relay information about the Dani tribe of New Guinea. But the formal voice’s narration exhibits no clear distinction from the expository mode’s voice-of-God commentary. Furthermore, why do we need to delineate broad epistemic categories that correspond to features most documentaries share? Most scholars would have a hard time naming a documentary that does not possess some manner of epistemic authority, hesitancy, and aesthetic all at the same time. The generalizing nature of Plantinga’s taxonomy reaffirms the value of Nichols’s scrutiny of historical periods and movements. Plantinga’s claim that Nichols oversimplifies history and favors the complexities of the present seems unwarranted when his own model relies heavily on the object of his critique.

Neither Nichols nor Plantinga mention literate voice. Nichols clearly understands the implications of literate voice and begins using the term mode to describe the rhetorical strategies of documentary in the early 1990s. Plantinga imagines narrative authority as voice, but he overlooks that authority and voice indicate different types of signification. Most appraisals of

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documentary voice do not address writing or the history of literacy.\textsuperscript{62} Voice instead becomes a presence that signifies authority, meaning, sense, point of view, perspective, or narrative authority—but never the act of writing.

Shortly after Nichols’s \textit{Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary} redefined documentary studies in the early 1990s, more scholarship began to address how nonfiction texts construct rhetoric. However, some early efforts tend to generalize the effects of documentary rhetoric. For example, Michael Renov’s “Toward a Poetics of Documentary” uses Aristotle’s \textit{Poetics} and the work of others (including Tzvetan Todorov) as a relay to outline the properties of documentary.\textsuperscript{63} Historically, poetics has been a Bordwellian pursuit in film studies and represents a systematic approach to the study of aesthetics that draws on cognitive science. Renov’s model of a documentary poetics suggests four tropes to understand the specifics of documentary discourse: preservation, persuasion, analysis, and expressivity. By analyzing these discursive functions, Renov illuminates the sociopolitical components in documentary form and distances his approach from the neoformalism of Bordwell. His essay shows how a documentary poetics incorporates historical dynamics. However, Renov perhaps generalizes the effects of documentary. Could preservation, persuasion, analysis, and expressivity comprise a poetics of the biographical Hollywood film as well?

Renov’s model relies on claims not necessarily regulated to documentary proper. Could a highly aestheticized Hollywood film such as \textit{Schindler’s List} (Stephen Spielberg, 1993) preserve

\textsuperscript{62} One essay that is on the right track is Trish FitzSimons’s “Braided Channels: A Genealogy of the Voice of Documentary,” \textit{Studies in Documentary Film} 3, no. 2 (2009): 131-146. FitzSimons’s essay suggests the choric voice as the interaction between filmmaker and others: producers, philanthropists, and members of the audience. However, the choric dimensions she describes represent a collective component her essay fails to identify. Where exactly do these voices come from? How do we identify them? FitzSimons, like many before her, locates voice as stabilized meaning and perspective.

a particular aspect of the historical real when it documents Liam Neeson at work on the studio set? The truth claims of documentary rely more on compelling argumentation than a privileged relationship to the real, so why does Renov suggest documentary’s ability to preserve the historical as inherent to the genre? The cinema’s presumed indexical bond with the historical world persists in all photographic images, not just those labeled nonfiction. Also, can we assume the solitary instance of color in Schindler’s List, seen in the red coat of a young girl, produces a similar aesthetic as the poetic documentaries of Dziga Vertov or Joris Ivens? Both examples aestheticize historical representation. Perhaps Renov’s poetics correspond to documentary assumptions more than the principles of the genre’s discourse.

The effectiveness of Aristotle’s poetics lies in its prescriptive qualities pertaining to a specific genre: the tragedy. For Aristotle, the structures of tragedy involve examining plot, character, and language. By delimiting the rules of the game, Aristotle highlights the production of a specific genre over generalized rhetorical strategies to show how poetry advances the features of language (e.g. meter, verse) in the service of mimesis. In coming to understand poetry’s universality, Aristotle distinguishes between poetic and historical writing. The historian speaks of what has happened, while the poet speaks of what might be. The gulf between poetry and history initially recalls a similar divide between fiction and nonfiction, but as Renov points out, documentary employs both poetic and historical modes of production. But if we think of documentary production as a form of writing, what defines its structure and how does it differ from narrative fiction?

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66 Aristotle, 16-17.
My working definition of documentary draws on ideas put forth by Philip Rosen and Nichols in the early 1990s. Rosen suggests documentary embodies historical expectations that exceed what we may find in raw footage, home movies, travelogues, and live newscasts. Editing and composition provide rhetorical structure to footage and usher it into the realm of modern historiography and narrative. Rosen cites the Abraham Zapruder footage of John F. Kennedy as one well-known example of a historical document subjected to documentary renegotiation. He explains how the inclusion of the Zapruder footage in the 1988 film JFK: A Time Remembered (Mark Obenhaus) signals a shift toward the realm of documentary. JFK possesses temporal distance from the immediacy of the Zapruder footage and constructs a rhetoric based on historical reflection. For Rosen, the synthesis of knowledge claims vis-à-vis sequencing separates document from documentary.

Nichols suggests that fiction foregrounds a metaphoric relationship to lived experience—it does not take the form of an explicit argument or embody the same rhetorical considerations of films we label documentaries. In other words, documentaries directly engage the viewer by minimizing fictive aspects to employ a metonymic representation of lived experience.

Recognizing lived experiences and the arguments made about them distinguishes documentary from fiction. Some may claim that not all documentaries present arguments or that narrative fiction structures raw footage as well. However, Rosen and Nichols provide models of documentary that inform the crux of this dissertation: to analyze moving images that synthesize truth claims and minimize their fictive aspects in the service of philosophical, political, and institutional argumentation.


68 Nichols, Representing Reality, 3-31.
My work takes a cue from Aristotle by examining the structures of a specific genre: the autobiographical documentary. Autobiography foregrounds literate voice, and therefore, writing. The question of how the literate voice persists in documentary is an autobiographical inquiry: how does the Self persist in moving images? How does the literate Self constitute a mode of inquiry?

**Autobiography**

Autobiography emerged as a literary genre in the late eighteenth century, but the origins of its form commenced with Augustine’s *Confessions* in 398. Scholarship on autobiography ranges from methods connecting individuality with historical developments to models for metaphysical conceptions of Self that transcend cultural effects. Philippe Lejeune’s widely cited *autobiographical pact* suggests an author’s ability to reveal the “whole truth” if the reader comprehends the author, narrator, and protagonist of an autobiography as the same person. However, the identity that Lejeune and others detect can only be expressed as literate voice, complicating the idea of selfhood as embodied human presence or a source of meaning. Some forget that writing does not guarantee meaning or truth.

While all forms of writing may be read as autobiographical to some degree, the autobiography’s generic lineage reveals a preference for privileged voices. Much pre-1970s autobiographical discourse canonizes the developmental narratives of “historically important” men like Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Furthermore, gender and class interests play a major role in privileging confessional autobiographical writing over more fragmented modes.

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such as journals and diaries. Beginning in the late 1970s, poststructuralist work on autobiography broke the essentialist notion of a unified, privileged selfhood built on the model of Western men. Feminist scholars began to write about other forms of life writing to show how memoirs, home movies, photos, television talk shows, personal ads, pornography, and performance art operate as autobiographical forms. Most importantly, poststructuralist work on autobiography by theorists like Barthes, Paul de Man, and Derrida showed how the concept of Self functions as an effect of historically constructed discourse.

Barthes’s well-known text *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* performs a reading of autobiography that exposes the instability of writing. Barthes attempts to rewrite himself through breaking the tradition of the autobiographical genre. He abandons the first-person singular at times in favor of other subject positions including he, R. B., and you. A significant portion of the book uses the structure of the alphabet to organize the random events in Barthes’s life, laying bare the fragmented process of writing oneself into existence. Barthes shows the distance between the author and writing, and he demonstrates that autobiography can never authenticate an embodied Self—it can only reveal multiple forms of identity as metaphors.

*Roland Barthes* minimizes the division between past and present to expose the act of writing as a construction of Self.

While Barthes seeks to unmask the myths surrounding authenticity and autobiographical acts, Paul de Man’s 1979 essay “Autobiography as De-Facement” declares the end of

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autobiography altogether. The essay describes the difficulty of locating autobiography as a genre because of the unclear distinction between fiction and nonfiction in writing. de Man suggests autobiography as a “figure of reading” operating in all texts, not just those we label autobiographical. Autobiography reveals that modes of understanding depend on language systems determined through writing. In other words, the unified subject suggested by Lejeune and others is an illusion, a mask that seeks to displace the fictional constructions inherent in all writing. The subject of autobiography can only exist as a metaphor or prosopopeia that undermines the concept of Self as whole, unified, real, or embodied. The Self materializes through literate voice.

Derrida addresses autobiography repeatedly over the course of his career. His commentary on Rousseau’s *Confessions* in *Of Grammatology* is perhaps the earliest deconstructive analysis of autobiography. In his reading, Derrida establishes the concept of the supplement to critique Rousseau’s claim that writing serves as a supplement to speech. Derrida establishes that a writer can never have command over the meaning a text communicates—the autobiographical subject always moves into other discourses. The supplement allows us to think about metalanguage and how identity formation depends on the supplementary; it always refers to somewhere else. Derrida suggests that writing embodies a presence that speech cannot, one that, among other things, produces signification after death. Therefore, the name or signature always exists between presence (speech) and death (writing). Literate voice transcends embodiment to position the Self as a mode of inquiry, one that exists between authorship and the

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social conventions that structure the expressions of the individual to herself and to others long after death.

Derrida returns to the connection between writing and otherness throughout his career as a way to deconstruct the unified Self. In his reading of Friedrich Nietzsche’s autobiographical *Ecce Homo*, Derrida reads a single page, the exergue, between the Preface and first chapter of the book to reflect on the boundaries of autobiographical address. Derrida later writes his own deconstructive autobiographical account “Circumfession” in *Jacques Derrida*, a collaboration with Geoffrey Bennington. While Bennington’s contribution, “Derridabase,” provides an expository account of Derrida’s work and career, “Circumfession” appears on the lower third of each page and works to destabilize Bennington’s narrative about Derrida. Derrida recounts the death of his mother (bringing to mind Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*) to preserve what Bennington’s text on the upper two-thirds of each page cannot say about the name “Derrida.”

“Circumfession” connects the death of Derrida’s mother to the death of Augustine’s mother Monica, relaying another’s autobiography, within one’s own, to illuminate autobiography’s intertextuality. While Bennington’s text turns “Derrida” into a system of thought or explanation, Derrida tries to return life or presence to the text, a task he concludes may prove impossible.

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Regardless, Jacques Derrida demonstrates the unpredictability of writing in productive ways. While the indexical relationship between photographically recorded images and the historical world assumes an opportunity to preserve the instability of the Self, film studies has yet to fully consider the unpredictability of writing inherent in moving images. The concept of literate voice seeks to fill this void.

Given the considerable attention paid to a destabilized notion of Self in poststructuralist literary theory, it puzzles me that many film scholars regard voice as a stabilized point of origin. Perhaps autobiographical theory’s privileging of the literary over moving images plays a role in film studies’ apathy toward writing. For decades, early film scholars were told that literary theory embodies a complexity that exceeds the study of moving images.79 For example, in a widely cited 1980 essay, Elizabeth Bruss recognizes film and video’s potential to replace traditional writing, yet claims “there is no real cinematic equivalent for autobiography.”80 Bruss suggests that films do not possess the capacity to effectively synthesize both observer and observed that literature has. She equates filming anything with writing and ignores how shaping raw materials (words/shots) into discourse signifies literate voice in autobiography.81

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79 The privileging of words over images can be traced to the beginning of adaptation studies. See George Bluestone’s Novels Into Film (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).


81 Bruss suggests that “there is no way of marking a personal attachment to one image rather than another, no way of discriminating a shot of the director from a shot of any other, indifferent individual” (305). Bruss’s hasty anti-auteurist stance might have trouble convincing the Cahiers du Cinéma critics of the 1950s that nothing distinguishes the mise-en-scène of John Ford’s films from the work of Bernard Vorhans. Perhaps the divide between film and literature stems from a difference in scholarly interest. After all, literary scholars working on autobiography probably have never spent much time studying the optical printing technique of Plumb Line (Carolee Schneemann, 1971).
Toward a Logology of the Moving Image

What do we mean when we label certain works autobiographical documentaries? Over the past three decades, scholars such as Renov and Jim Lane have used *autobiographical documentary* to describe films that display personal acts as sociopolitical understanding, foreground subjectivity as their primary subject, or exhibit a simultaneity that disrupts the opposition between objective and personal representation. More recently, scholars taking issue with the umbrella term *autobiographical* have put narrower categories into practice. Each of these sub-genres, including the *essay film*, *self-portrait film*, *personal documentary*, and *first person documentary*, carve out a particular niche that distinguishes them from other autobiographical texts. For example, essay films “lean toward intellectual reflections that often insist on more conceptual or pragmatic responses,” while the audiovisual self-portrait “is addressed primarily to the Self as other.” Alisa Lebow prefers *first person film* to describe works that “‘speak’ from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position.” While useful, these sub-categories still encounter the dilemma all writing on documentary faces: what counts as documentary and where do we draw the line between fiction and non-fiction?

The dilemma of what counts as documentary raises another important question: what counts as knowledge? Robert Ray asks this question in “The Bordwell Regime and the Stakes of

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84 Corrigan, 5; Laura Rascaroli, “The Self-Portrait Film: Michelangelo’s Last Gaze,” in *The Cinema of Me*, 60.

Knowledge,” an essay that responds to the critical method of Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson’s *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*.\(^\text{86}\) *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* employs a specific approach toward the study of film history, one that values evidence and legitimation over experimentation and chance. Ray reminds us that disciplinary definitions rely more on institutional discourse, popularity, or widespread use, than personal observation or coincidence. This dissertation counts any moving image text that foregrounds autobiographical writing in the service of argumentation as a form of autobiographical documentary. While such a definition may not be the most popular, it effectively narrows the boundaries of this project to reflect on works in which the negotiation of literate voice emerges as a primary focus. In many ways, the films that interest me address the ambiguity of writing or the difficulties one faces in making specific choices to convey ideas about one’s life/Self in the absence of physical presence. Such documentaries illuminate the process of writing more than they convey meaning or points of view about one’s life.

Some autobiographical films such as *Speaking Directly: Some American Notes* (Jon Jost, 1972), *Sunrise Over Tiananmen Square* (Shui-Bo Wang, 1998), and *Prodigal Sons* (Kimberly Reed, 2008) convey the political more explicitly in their content, while others like the personal experimental works of Carolee Schneemann, Stan Brakhage, and Jonas Mekas construct sociopolitical arguments primarily through their form. While some might object to blurring the distinction between experimental and documentary, many personal experimental works minimize their fictive aspects in the service of political argumentation. In this sense, they represent autobiographical forms that emphasize literate voice, often more explicitly than some works

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identified by scholars as autobiographical documentaries. In the following chapters, I show how literate voice generates concepts that anchor the rhetorical structures of two nonfiction works by Ross McElwee. By revealing the writing in and of moving images, we may uncover how literate voice informs concepts that structure the language of all texts operating in the realm of documentary.

In the next chapter, I propose a formal analytical method more theoretically inclusive than most close reading practices. I develop a logology for moving images and employ Kenneth Burke’s analysis of Augustine’s Confessions in The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology as my theoretical model.  

While Burke demonstrates how writing about religion (the Word) can clarify the general function of language (words), I use Burke’s text as a heuristic to suggest how cinematic writing about the Self can illuminate the rhetorical function of moving images. With the structures of an autobiographical documentary identified and its conceptual tree mapped out, we can trace the sociopolitical implications of literate voice. We can analyze how films exceed or contradict the structures they establish in relation to social and political frameworks. Likewise, close reading and the concept of voice can move beyond purely aesthetic or hermeneutic considerations to serve an epistemological function. Rather than merely acknowledging the Self exists in a realm between expressivity and alterity, logology stresses how literate voice demonstrates or performs concepts through formal structures. This emphasis on utility avoids many of the generalizations made about the relationship between moving images and sociopolitical concepts. Like Burke, I am interested in what texts do and how they function, not what they mean or represent.

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Writing, of course, depends on the social conventions of cultural systems. Logology shows how the Self enters into a process of negotiating these systems through writing. A logology of the moving image has far-reaching benefits for the study of autobiographical documentary, a genre where voice often exists explicitly between personal and political realms. However, logology does not attempt to fix meanings. Instead, it proposes that the structures of an individual’s language can teach us something about the general functions of society.
CHAPTER 2
LOGOLOGY

I don’t think any word can explain a man’s life.

– Jerry Thompson, Citizen Kane

Symbolic Action and Nonsymbolic Motion

When Kenneth Burke first used the word logology in the early 1960s to name his methodological shift away from his theory of dramatism, he believed he had coined the term. Decades later, Burke recalled his discovery of two eighteenth-century theological usages of the word.¹ One of these identifies logology as “the doctrine of the Logos,” referring to Christ as “the Word” in the Book of John. The other describes a secular meaning appearing as early as 1820: a “the science of words” signifying “philology.” The latter definition resembles what Burke had in mind when he conceived of logology as the study of “words about words.”

Logology has also come to describe a field of recreational linguistics popularized by Dmitri Borgmann in his 1965 book Language on Vacation: An Olio of Orthographical Oddities.² Borgmann would later found the journal Word Ways in 1968, a publication still in print today.

Recreational linguistics, also known as recreational mathematics, studies word play and games; it analyzes how forms such as lipograms, palindromes, and pangrammatic windows manipulate arrangements, sounds, and spellings of letters and words. Burke had a different conception of logology when he published The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology in 1961. For Burke, logology names the method by which we locate distinctions in language and trace how words constitute our realm of knowledge. Burke’s logology is driven by epistemological inquiry.

Understanding the difference between *symbolic action* and *nonsymbolic motion* is crucial to comprehending Burke’s logology. Burke considers *motives* as action as early as 1935’s *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, but he most thoroughly addresses the distinction between symbolic action and nonsymbolic motion in a 1978 essay in *Critical Inquiry*.³ Symbolic action signifies forms of communication by organisms capable of using symbol systems. Burke defines humans as “symbol using animals,” able to craft language out of the realm of nonsymbolic motion (Nature). He distinguishes the intuitive signaling systems of animals from the language of humans. Burke explains while a dog can bark, it cannot “bark a tract on barking.”⁴ Human language has a second-level or reflexive aspect that distinguishes it from the communications of other animals.

A literate conception of Self develops through symbolic action and takes the motivations of the individual into account. However, grammatical structure alone cannot embody the totality of human language. Symbolic action depends on the social context of language, or conventions, irreducible to pure reason. Persuasive appeals depend on *identification*, a means of provoking cooperation from other humans in response to symbols. Utterances that signify intention through literate voice exist as discourse, and other people must recognize the conventions at work to draw conclusions about possible meanings.

Burke explains how the air conditioning units in movie theaters showing thrillers have to work harder due to how the units respond to symbolic action.⁵ While the raw materials of film belong to the realm of nonsymbolic motion, the audience’s identification of these recorded

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⁴ Burke, “(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action,” 810.

⁵ Ibid., 833-834.
materials as discourse turns them into symbolic action. We experience the content of films first as organisms processing sensory information through a central nervous system. We then interpret the cinema’s raw material as story or symbolic action. Burke claims there can be motion without action, but there cannot be action without motion. A film played in an empty theater yields no symbolic action, and we depend on the realm of Nature for the raw materials of language. While an air conditioning unit obviously cannot respond directly to how a film constructs its effects, its sensors do respond to an audience’s identification of symbolic acts and the increased body heat in a theater. In a similar fashion, a dog responds to the smell of food put in its dish after its master interprets a clock as “dinner time.” Burke’s air conditioning anecdote demonstrates the unique ability of humans to exhibit two different kinds of behavior, one corresponding to a film as a symbolic act and the other belonging to the realm of nonsymbolic motion. An air conditioning unit or a dog can only respond to nonsymbolic motion—they do not possess the capacity for language.

Symbolic action involves a process of duplication. If the realm of nonsymbolic motion provides immediate sensory experiences of the physical world, our identification and shaping of those experiences through literate voice requires a specific kind of duplication. Writing, or entering the resources of story, functions differently than primitive forms of duplication such as learning to hunt from imitating the physical techniques of an elder tribesman. Burke views language as analogical extensions he calls fictions (using Jeremy Bentham’s term). All symbolic gestures begin in the realm of nonsymbolic motion in reference to the physical processes and objects we experience. However, because the words we invent for things in Nature cannot stay

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put and typically exceed literal meaning, symbolic action equates intellect with elements of grammar and syntax. For example, Burke explains that the sensation we feel when we bite into an orange differs from uttering the words: “the taste of an orange,” because the latter enters the realm of language and signifies literate voice. Our words for the objects of Nature cannot translate into discourse without signifying intention, and the relationship between the Self and the physical world depends on the public nature of conventional language systems. How we construct symbolic action determines how we identify meanings in relationship to society.

Burke’s concept of symbolic action supports a literate conception of Self. The literate Self recalls the events of life through writing. Authors then essentialize or proportionalize the details of life to reflect a central concept or motive that embodies their personal experiences. All other motives emerge from this principal structure (e.g. narrative tropes, temporal sequences). The Self as person (literate/symbolic) contrasts the physical Self (wordless/nonsymbolic). For filmmakers, the photographic image can only transcend the realm of nonsymbolic motion if structured as discourse through literate voice. Obviously, documentary represents a form of writing that creates symbolic action from the raw materials of Nature. However, a photograph of oneself taken in front of a mirror does not instinctively signify the literate Self or symbolic action; it only represents a documentation of the realm of nonsymbolic motion. The literate Self emerges through symbolic action by naming and structuring the sensations experienced in Nature. Nature merely provides the materials for language. The literate Self materializes through

7 Ibid., 204.

8 Burke discusses the difference between “essentializing” and “proportionalizing” interpretative strategies in relation to Freud in The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 261.
the countless negotiations, duplications, negations, and polarities present in writing. Logology names the method that traces the concept of Self as a form of writing.

The concept of polarity also provides an important foundation for many of Burke’s ideas, especially logological views of human activity. In contrast to the monadism of behaviorism, logological inquiry stresses the polarity or negation in language. Burke explains, “the study of words as words in contexts asks us to ask how they equate with one another, how they imply one another, and how they become transformed.”9 We have things and words for things in our lives, and the attempt to name the experiences of nonsymbolic motion is a symbolic pursuit. Our sensory experiences of the physical, historical world cannot signify the alterity of symbolic action. For Burke, the concept of Self must be defined in terms of the countless negations, duplications, and polarities within the structures of language. All symbolic actions shape the Self in relation to Nature, and the polarity between the realm of symbolic action and nonsymbolic motion facilitates the need for language. Although a kind of collective unconscious emerges among those who speak a common language, “there is also the principle of individuation whereby the immediacy of sensuous experiences, pleasures and pains (demarcated by the centrality of the nervous system), cannot be shared in its immediacy.”10 Logology seeks to chart the polarities of an individual’s language—to show that the attempt to name the immediacy of sensuous experience signifies the literate Self.

From Dramatism to Logology

The evolution of Burke’s theory of dramatism (beginning in the mid-1930s) into his concept of logology in the late 1950s witnessed the revision of several ideas and terms.


10 Burke, “(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action,” 830.
Nevertheless, the crux of Burke’s oeuvre is the concept of the motive and its function in communication. While he alludes to drama in his pre-1940s work, Burke’s theory of dramatism received detailed attention in 1941’s *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Dramatism’s approach to language contrasts with what Burke describes as the scientific approach.¹¹ Scientism concerns itself with meaning, or questions of naming, while dramatism analyzes language as symbolic action. All language participates in drama. Identifying the motives of others requires more than a sense of kinship with texts. Identification or persuasion involves participating in another’s language (i.e. speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea) to see another’s identity.¹² Symbolic action invites an audience to participate in drama and play a particular language game.

Burke’s symbolic analysis of the drama of language requires identifying the associational clusters in a writer’s work, or locating patterns that indicate a writer’s inner logic.¹³ These clusters may take the form of words, structures, and images that anchor a particular concept or pattern throughout a text, linking textual form to literate voice. Motives and their conscious and unconscious interrelationships make up a writer’s *situation* and reveal the psychic economy of the individual. For Burke, every text possesses an inner logic that signifies the literate Self through the internal structures that an author creates. Symbolic action functions as a synecdoche of the physical Self, and reading the symbolic action of language facilitates a literate understanding of Self and voice. Texts do not write themselves, and the possibility of a text without an author cannot exist. However, we do not have to interpret every utterance as an

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¹³ Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 20.
autobiographical act, and we certainly should not take an author’s motivations as the only source of meaning.

The psychic economy of the author reflects the inner logic and the strategic elements the author employs to elicit responses from individuals. Burke offers the situational and strategic patterns in writing as evidence of the literate Self in his work throughout the mid-1940s. In 1945’s *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke develops his situation/strategy binary into his well-known dramatistic pentad to offer more flexibility through the inclusion of five terms to chart a text’s motives: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose.14 The five terms of the pentad mirror the traditional questions of investigation: who (agent), what (act), where/when (scene), why (purpose), and how (agency), but more importantly, they balance the analysis of motivations to reflect the complexities of sociopolitical or historical influence. The motivations of a text do not just signify the conscious impulses of the author, and no text eludes historical influence. The ratios between the terms of the pentad attempt to chart the dialectical elements of language and reflect the social aspects of writing. Burke explains that while the text itself signifies the dramatistic act, the other elements of the pentad ensure that analysis of the act does not reflect a central meaning tied to authorial intention. Burke seeks to map the tensions or the dialectical transformations in language. Tracing the symbolic action of a single text or a representative selection of an individual’s writing enables a literate understanding of Self.

Following *A Rhetoric of Motives* in 1950, Burke continued to work on a project conceived as “A Symbolic of Motives.”15 However, the work never materialized in a concise published form despite Burke’s assurance that he actively labored toward its completion.

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throughout the 1950s. Much of what Burke conceived for “A Symbolic of Motives” materialized in a subsequent series of essays. These essays marked a shift toward logology, eventually culminating in *The Rhetoric of Religion* and the works collected as *Language as Symbolic Action* in 1966. In the move from dramatism to logology, Burke migrates away from the analysis of literature and toward studying the discriminations in theological discourse. In one of his last published essays in 1985, he describes dramatism as an ontology (the study of what humans are: symbol using animals) and logology as an epistemology (the knowledge we acquire when we learn the arbitrary conventions of language).\(^{16}\) When the element of story interacts with the realm of nonsymbolic motion, discourse exists. Logology facilitates a view of writing as a mode of epistemological inquiry.

Burke’s move toward theology proposes a theory of language rather than a methodology for the analysis of literature. Like the dialectical method proposed by the dramatistic pentad in *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke’s logology seeks to trace words as discourse. But most importantly, logology considers the literate voice of the individual in dialogue with sociopolitical and philosophical elements. Burke believes that words transcend the function of conveying meaning and instead constitute a form of knowledge. In other words, symbols create a form of reality that names our experiences, and the key to understanding the realm of Nature involves connecting literate voice to the creation of social reality. The literate Self proclaims a type of social knowledge and logology provides the method to understand what it means to live in a world conceived by language.

\(^{16}\) Burke, “Dramatism and Logology,” 89-90.
Fundamental Elements of Logology

In *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Burke connects symbolic action and nonsymbolic motion with theology’s division of spirit (mind) and body (matter). By reading Augustine’s *Confessions* logologically, Burke shows how myth, story, and narrative transform the polar motives of one’s autobiography into a temporal sequence. Burke identifies Augustine’s polar motives or dialectic pair as *perversion* and *conversion*, and he shows how the symbolic action of *Confessions* constructs a literate conception of Self. Burke’s analysis of *Confessions* doesn’t make claim to the truth or falsity of Augustine’s theological doctrine, but seeks to understand how writing about God produces ideas about the general function of language. Before outlining the relationship between Burke’s reading of *Confessions* and documentary, this section unpacks five elements fundamental to understanding logology: *dialectic, negative, hierarchy, entelechy, and attitude*. These elements embody symbolic action and distinguish human beings as “symbol using animals.” Most importantly to this project, these five elements also comprise an emerging poetics of the literate voice of autobiographical documentary.

In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke uses the terms dialectic and dramatism interchangeably. Although Burke’s notion of dialectic draws on certain aspects of the Hegelian, Marxist, and Platonic models, his is not concerned specifically with ideological conflict, explanation, meaning, or the idea of truth. Instead, Burke addresses the principles of language and looks for the dramatic alignments in texts, or sets of dialectical equations through which general concepts and perspectives are refined. The significance of language stems from the dialectical sum of its motives. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke offers no less than ten entries on dialectic, all contributing to the more general definition: “the possibilities of linguistic

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17 Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 69.
transformation.”18 Burke clarifies his use of dialectic further in *A Rhetoric of Motives* when he explains the difference between positive terms and dialectical terms.19 Positive terms name things of experience that are unambiguously verifiable (e.g. the *house* I live in), but dialectical terms have no positive referent (e.g. capitalism). We can only attempt to define dialectical terms by paraphrase and association; they only hold signification through discourse. Dialectic reveals the substance of the literate Self and exhibits the shifting perspectives of the sociopolitical climate in the moment of utterance.

Burke’s dialectic differs from other models in that he attempts to analyze opposite terms by finding what they share in common. In a 1950 review of *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke’s close friend Malcolm Cowley explains:

>Burke] is a dialectician who is always trying to reconcile opposites by finding that they have a common source. Give him two apparently hostile terms like poetry and propaganda, art and economics, speech and action, and immediately he looks beneath them for the common ground on which they stand. Where the Marxian dialectic moves forward in time from the conflict of thesis and antithesis to their subsequent resolution or synthesis—and always emphasize the conflict—the Burkean dialectic moves backwards from conflicting effects to harmonious causes. It is a dialectic of peacemaking and not war.20

Burke emphasizes how the dialectical relationship between Self and culture involves finding the words to duplicate, counter, and extend the experience of the physical Self. Logology uncovers the literate Self by examining how the dialectical aspects of texts reconcile through the ambiguities in writing. Burke delimits these uncertainties by demonstrating how general concepts, what he calls “god-terms,” order the structures of texts. It does not matter if these “god-terms” convey truth or meaning. Instead, “god-terms” represent concepts from which


discourse originates and all other motives derive. Dialectical terms belong to the realm of symbolic action because they exist in discourse rather than Nature; they are defined in terms of what they are verifiably not. A logology of the moving image reveals how cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, and editing demonstrate or anchor these dialectical terms or “god-terms” in films, a process outlined in more detail in the following chapters.

Logology is not concerned with reading formal elements as mere representations or sources of meaning. For example, instead of identifying a filmmaker’s scripted voice-over narration as a point of view, we might first seek to trace the pattern of when and where voice-over appears in a film. We could then identify what kinds of images and editing techniques appear in these moments to conceive of how a particular concept emerges between an interplay of formal techniques. We might ask: what types of shots are chosen to convey information? Do repetitions of specific words intersect with certain patterns in a film’s *mise-en-scène*? Does the tone of the voice-over narration fluctuate at specific moments that correspond with particular shot types? My analysis of Ross McElwee’s *Time Indefinite* (1993) in the next chapter develops these kinds of questions to show how the film performs the “god-term” mortality. McElwee’s film demonstrates the impossibility of expressing God, birth, and death in writing by crafting a series of images with scripted voice-over narration. Although McElwee tries to explain how certain images conjure the ineffable, his words ultimately have trouble conveying his intention. Consequently, his film demonstrates the impossibility of representing the ineffable in moving images.

Burke’s concept of the negative represents the essential distinction between the verbal and nonverbal in language.²¹ The negative relates to dialectic and belongs to the realm of

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symbolic action. Burke explains that “to look for negatives in nature would be as absurd as though you were to go out hunting for the square root of minus one.” Burke’s example obviously shows the implication of a mathematical symbol system as a product of language, suggesting that “minus one” or “-1” automatically indicates the symbol “one” or “1” by default. The negative resembles a principle or idea according to Burke, not a name for a verifiable thing of Nature.

Given its purely symbolic nature, the negative escapes identification in images. However, moving images can indicate the negative through their structures. For example, some may feel that certain documentaries approach their subjects more ethically than others. Of course, identifying a particular shot design, scene, or documentary mode as ethical automatically indicates that what it is claimed to not be: an unethical representation. One cannot go out into the world and look for ethical images—they must reveal themselves in the structures of language. Thus, if someone claims the observational mode offers a more ethical representation of documentary subjects than the poetic mode, such a claim has little to do with the assumed indexical relationship between physical referent and recording device. We cannot locate ethics in the pure images of Nature. Instead, ethical claims hinge on Burke’s suggestion that to use words (or construct a rhetoric from documentary images), we must understand that images are not the things they signify—the metaphor of writing is not literal. The binary of ethical/unethical exists in the dialectic of language. We cannot negotiate ethics or the negative in any other way but through language.

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23 Ibid., 501-502.
Burke contends that humans are motivated by a sense of order, or what he calls the spirit of hierarchy—the ultimate order of terms. An ultimate order places the competing terms of the dialectical order in a “hierarchy, or sequence, or evaluative series, so that, in some way, we went by a fixed and reasoned progression from one of these to another, the members of the entire group being arranged developmentally with relation to one another.” Thus, a guiding idea or development emerges in texts that may suggest why certain compromises appear superior to others. Burke explains how Plato treats the four kinds of imperfect government in *The Republic* as such a development. The steps from Plato’s ideal government to “‘timocracy,’ and thence successively to ‘oligarchy,’ ‘democracy,’ and ‘tyranny’ are interpreted as the unfolding of a single process.” In addition, each of these political structures embodies an ideological position that goes by a summarizing term (e.g. “freedom” for democracy, “protection” for tyranny). For Burke, leaving each structure alone to confront one another is dialectical, but Plato’s development signifies an ultimate order. The rhetorical function of the ultimate order is to communicate a universal purpose to the masses. Instead of seeing oneself as an individual acting locally with other individuals, one feels part of a larger process implementing historical change.

Burke ultimately sees hierarchy as a human reaction to the concept of the negative, a way to organize the processes of knowledge we create in the attempt to symbolize the materials of Nature. He suggests humans are “rotten with perfection” and explains how symbols allow us to imagine or aspire to a perfection or ideal that remains beyond our grasp in reality. In a sense, documentary represents a form in which formal elements work toward a paradox of truth or

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25 Ibid., 187.
26 Ibid., 188.
27 Burke, “Definition of Man,” 507.
perfection that can never be attained. However, hierarchy takes shape through decisions in cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, and editing. Much of the rhetorical power of documentary stems from our acceptance or scrutiny of the way literate voice names the experience of Nature. Furthermore, the striving for perfection, the drive to realize potentials, allows for metaphysical associative clusters like God/Devil and Heaven/Hell to exist. A belief in divine concepts like God facilitates endless striving toward perfecting the use of symbols. After all, we can only conceive of Hell (e.g. failure, destruction, Devil) if we believe in Heaven (e.g. perfection, realization, God).

All rhetorics strive toward an idea of perfection, or entelechy. Burke uses entelechy to conceive of human behavior rather than essence. Furthermore, the entelechy Burke envisions can also result in destruction. He recalls the “perfection” the Nazis strove to achieve as one example of entelechy in a negative sense. The drive toward entelechy can also result in problematic outcomes in documentary production. Joshua Oppenheimer and Christine Cynn’s *The Act of Killing* (2012) has sparked much controversy over its representation of the Indonesian killings of 1965-1966. The film stages elaborate reenactments based on Hollywood genres performed by actual members of the death squads who murdered over 500,000 Indonesians. While Oppenheimer and Cynn contend their film investigates the nature of impunity, some (including the current Indonesian government) feel the film sides with the mass murdering “winners” of the anti-communist purge. The film also makes political injustice entertaining to Western audiences through its hyper-stylized *mise-en-scène* and ironic, comic treatment of unapologetic killers.

Finally, Burke acknowledges that the Self possesses two sources of reference for identity: the physical body and the potentialities of symbolicity.28 While the physical Self has a

28 Burke, “(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action,” 815.
connection to the immediacy of sensation, the literate Self embodies modes of identification made possible by social relations. These two aspects of Self correspond to Burke’s fundamental binary of action/motion. Attitude represents one of the most ambiguous Burkean concepts and exists somewhere between action and motion. Burke largely regulates attitude to the realm of symbolic action in *A Grammar of Motives*, classifying the term under act, agency, or agent. However, decades later, Burke explicitly connects attitude with both action and motion, even suggesting the term as a potential sixth component of his dramatistic pentad (or would-be hexad) in the afterward of the third edition of *Attitudes Toward History*. While attitude has been described as a kind of “pre-action closely tied to the body,” the following anecdote from *The Philosophy of Literary Form* expresses its complicated position more clearly:

Thus, I know of a man who, going to a dentist, was proud of the calmness with which he took his punishment. But after the session was ended, the dentist said to him: “I observe that you are very much afraid of me. For I have noted that, when patients are frightened, their saliva becomes thicker, more sticky. And yours was exceptionally so.” Which would indicate that, while the man in the dentist’s chair was “dancing an attitude of calmness” on the public level, as a social facade, on the purely bodily or biological level his salivary glands were “dancing his true attitude.” For he was apprehensive of pain, and his glandular secretions “said so.”

Burke here describes attitude as something implicit in both language and biology. The question remains if Burke locates attitude as a kind of preparation or a substitution for an act, or perhaps both at the same time? But, given this possibility, does preparation or substitution already always behave physiologically on its own? Or is attitude most synonymous with terms like motive, orientation, or strategy? Burke tries to clarify in “(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action”:


31 Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 11.
Whatever the implications of an ATTITUDE, as a kind of incipient or future action, it must be by some means grounded in the set of the body now; and thus, though an attitude of kindness may be but the preparation for the doing of a kind act (a subsequent mode of behavior), it is already “behaving” physiologically in ways of its own (as a dog’s implicit way of “conjugating the verb ‘to eat’” is to begin by salivating, a bodily motion that in effect implies the future tense, “I will eat”; the present tense of the verb being bodily conjugated by eating; and “I have eaten” is also in its way a now, as the dog curls up for a comfortable, satisfied snooze).\(^{32}\)

Perhaps attitude “designates the point of personal mediation between the realms of nonsymbolic motion and symbolic action.”\(^{33}\) Autobiographical documentary potentially expresses more of an attitude than voice if we consider the shaping of Nature as a kind of personal mediation. Can we view the attitude of autobiographical documentary as a kind of preparation for the act of self-representation? Is attitude a sort of incipient action grounded in the bodily material of the physical Self that always already behaves according to the laws of physics? Perhaps attitude functions as the most important poetic element of autobiographical documentary, much like Aristotle’s suggestion of plot (mythos) as the essential element of tragedy. Just as mythos most effectively reveals the patterns of human experience in the tragedy, the autobiographical documentary’s attitude relays the personal experience of shaping Nature into literate voice. Attitude directs how literate voice communicates, not what it means.

**Words About The Word**

*The Rhetoric of Religion* consists of four parts: three chapters and an epilogue. In the first chapter, “On Words and The Word,” Burke outlines six analogies between logology and theology. In the second and third chapters, Burke offers close readings of *Confessions* and the first three books of Genesis to trace how logology illuminates the motives in each text. The final section of the book contains a humorous conversation between God and the Devil that provides a

\(^{32}\) Burke, “(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action,” 816.

\(^{33}\) Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 394.
way for Burke to demonstrate logology in a more accessible way. Most importantly, logology
names the model of symbol-using Burke had been developing over his entire career to reveal the
ambiguities and contradictions in language. Burke is not explicitly concerned with aesthetics as a
form of artistic self-expression. While style represents an essential component of logology,
Burke emphasizes the utility of texts over point of view or “art for art’s sake.” The structures of
texts reveal their utility and logology provides a method to uncover how texts function.

The first chapter of The Rhetoric of Religion provides a more refined explanation of the
relationship between symbolic action and nonsymbolic motion. Burke chooses to write about
theology instead of literature in Rhetoric because he says religious writing embodies
thoroughness and addresses the most radical, or most perfect entelechy: God. “The concept of
God epitomizes the abstracting power of language. Language is driven by entelechy to establish
the ultimate Title of Titles.” Establishing the concept of God, the ultimate Title of Titles, offers
a way to explain or invent the definitive entelechy: that which cannot be experienced in Nature.
Burke uses God as a way to suggest other potential “god-terms,” or linguistic analogues that
function as summarizing names or titles of texts. If all writing aspires to perfection, “god-terms”
summarize the drive toward entelechy. In The Rhetoric of Religion, whatever can be said about
theology can also be said about the function of writing. The Word (of God) and the words we use
to refer to theological doctrine are both part of a vertical dialectic where words and The Word
affect one another. Similarly, the “god-terms” I establish in Chapters Three and Four serve a
related purpose. Whatever can be said of mortality in McElwee’s Time Indefinite and
resurrection in Photographic Memory (2011) can also be said about the function of
autobiographical documentary practice. Cinematography, mise-en-scène, and editing reveal the

34 Robert L. Heath, Realism and Relativism: A Perspective on Kenneth Burke (Macon: Mercer University
literate Self under the guise of a summarizing concept or “god-term.” Logology uncovers the literate Self as a form informed by politics and culture rather than an authoritative point of view. Logology allows us to view dominant ideologies or bureaucratized ideas as merely one perspective. The writing of personal experience cannot exist in Nature as nonsymbolic motion, and language can never be literal in the strictest sense of the word.

Burke’s first analogy establishes a reversible analogical relationship between the supernatural realm of the Word and the empirical realm of words.35 He outlines an elaborate structure and describes the four realms that words may refer to: words for the natural (e.g. tree, sun), words for the socio-political realm (e.g. American, patrimony), words about words (logology), and words for the supernatural (the ineffable). While language originates in Nature, words ultimately transcend linear movement and extend in all directions. Burke suggests a vertical dialectic (“the Upward and Downward Way”) where the language we use to describe the supernatural originates from the realms of words. However, Burke resists a simple historical dialectic by pointing out that The Word also affects how we understand Nature, the sociopolitical, and logology in general. The existence or truth of God does not matter; we have language to negotiate the concept of the divine being.

This first analogy relates to how documentaries create ideal structures that depend on formal design. For example, Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) presents a structure perhaps best described as “virtuous patriotism.” Moore’s patriotism favors the working class over the Bush administration in an effort to present truth claims about the “War on Terror.” However, what Moore expresses about virtue and patriotism also works its way back down rhetorically (“the Downward Way”) in the documentaries of his detractors. Films such as

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Fahrenhype 9/11 (Alan Peterson, 2004) and Manufacturing Dissent (Rick Caine and Debbie Melnyk, 2007) use Moore’s literate voice against him. Caine and Melnyk suggest Fahrenheit 9/11 presents footage out of context to make President George W. Bush appear uneducated or narcissistic. They claim Moore fails to explain the context of archival footage, such as when Bush addresses an audience at a charity fundraiser where he is expected to poke fun at himself. Dissent discredits Moore in an effort to portray him as a power hunger capitalist, much in the same way Moore frames Bush in Fahrenheit 9/11. Thus, from another point of view, Moore’s patriotism suddenly appears as greed or ego. Dissent employs Moore’s own rhetorical tactics (e.g. archival footage, editing techniques, hostile witness interviews, guerrilla-style ambushes) against him to create an alternate vision of patriotism, one resistant to the liberal media.

Burke’s second analogy suggests, “words are to non-verbal things [Nature] as spirit is to matter.”\textsuperscript{36} Using theology as a model for logology allows Burke to demonstrate that language adds new dimensions of discourse to Nature, just as words allow us to conceptualize God. The Word allows for the greatest freedom in Burke’s vertical dialectic because God represents the most perfect entelechy. Logology allows us to chart the vertical movement back and forth, from Nature to the sociopolitical realm to the ineffable, to discover how the words we have for God have power over one’s perspective. The second chapter of Rhetoric brings this idea into focus through a close reading of Augustine’s Confessions.

Just as words transcend the things they name, documentary form transforms Nature into discourse. Most often, this discourse takes on a materiality of its own, transcending the thing it names. For example, the visual atrocities of Nazi Germany in Alain Resnais’s Nuit et Brouillard (Night and Fog, 1955) make it impossible to negotiate the film as pure documentation of

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 16-17.
locations (e.g. the abandoned grounds of Auschwitz and Majdanek) or written description. Instead, the literate voice of the film transcends the documentation of Nature to reflect a host of potential “god-terms” including evil, trauma, nationalism, or bravery. *Night and Fog* stands as one of the most important documentaries in history because of its ability to construct discourse effectively. Its images simultaneously represent the realm of Nature (pure document) and what does not exist in Nature (evil or trauma).

The third analogy in *Rhetoric* stresses the importance of the negative. The negative does not exist in Nature; words are not the things they name. However, we must describe Nature in terms of what it is not. The same principle applies to God; the divine being must always be described by what he/she/it isn’t. Burke locates the most obvious instance of the negative as irony, “a figure that at its simplest, states A in terms of non-A (as when, on a day of bad weather, we might say, ‘What a beautiful day it is!’).” Burke applies ideas from Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* to suggest how writing may be understood analogically. Theological writing, then, arrives at an ultimate negative theology because God cannot be described by the positives of Nature.

Sometimes we forget that documentaries construct arguments. Moving images can represent the realm of Nature, but cannot fully embody it. Even the most seemingly transparent documentary filmmakers, such as Wiseman, choose certain images over others. They order events to create tensions, subtleties, and dynamics in the service of literate voice. Like all

37 Ibid., 17-23.

38 Ibid., 18-19.

constructed discourse, documentary “involves a principle of negativity in its very essence.”

William Rueckert effectively describes logology as “not just words about words; [but] it is, above all else, knowledge about words (languages) along with a sustaining attitude, the ironic discounting of words.” A logology of documentary film, then, may best be described as a form of knowledge about how moving images communicate—a way to determine how formal structures dictate how we understand the concepts we use to describe the realm of Nature, the sociopolitical, and the supernatural through writing.

In his fourth analogy, Burke elaborates on “god-terms.” While his third analogy addresses the negative in language, Burke’s fourth analogy leads toward a summarizing term or “god-term” that functions as a paradigm analogy of an entire text. For Burke, a “god-term” contains all of the motivations and ideas implicit in literate voice. Logology works as the method to unpack these motivations. Hermeneutics alone cannot reveal the motivation of language, and logology outlines how words and symbol systems work structurally. The analysis of style is fundamental in this pursuit. Rueckert suggests, “one must always say something about style—about the form of the contents of the word, about the structure of the contents of the text, about the contexts of the text, and (to name but one more) about the text as a symbolic action.” In regards to a logology of autobiographical documentary, Rueckert’s statement might be rephrased as: one must always say something about how a documentary communicates—about the composition of the frame, about editing patterns, about how narrative and stylistic choices signal the literate voice of an individual in the context of society.


41 Rueckert, 254.


43 Rueckert, 257.
As Burke progresses to his fifth and sixth analogies, he begins to focus more specifically on the formal structures of texts. His fifth analogy speaks of the relationship between time and eternity. As writing unfolds in time, word-by-word, the meanings that words produce constitute an essence, “a kind of fixed significance or definition that is not confined to any of the sentence’s parts, but rather pervades or inspirits the sentence as a whole.” Burke points out that language must be viewed in its totality because no word can embody the essence of a concept. As we read a text, we induce concepts from its temporal structures. These concepts then work their way back the “Downward Way” to influence how we may reinterpret narrative sequences. In other words, the particulars of a text signify concepts that permeate throughout a work. Burke illustrates this in more detail when he outlines the tautological cycle in “The First Three Chapters of Genesis” in *The Rhetoric of Religion*.

Burke’s analogy between time and eternity relates to moving images as well. Films perhaps offer a clearer example of the analogy than literature, since films are generally shot out of sequence and then constructed into a coherent structure. Autobiographical documentary foregrounds literate voice, and a logology of the moving image traces how formal decisions illuminate concepts. These “god-terms” anchor the entelechy that guides literate voice. Furthermore, Burke insists that not only do the words (images) of texts generate concepts, but concepts anchor how we understand the particulars of a text as well. This vertical dialectic between the unfolding of images and essence constructs the hierarchies of texts. Certain formal decisions appear more significant than others when organized hierarchically.

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45 Ibid., 27.
Finally, Burke’s sixth analogy closely relates to the fifth. He discusses the likeness between the design of the Trinity and the form of language.\textsuperscript{46} The figures of the Trinity correspond to different concepts: Father (power), Son (wisdom), and Holy Spirit (love). Burke equates the positives of Nature with power (Father) and the words for positives with wisdom (Son). In a sense, the Father (e.g. a physical tree) generates the Son (e.g. the word “tree”). Furthermore, the technical correspondence between the Father and Son mimics the bond that comprises the Holy Ghost. Rueckert explains, “one way to understand this analogy is to realize that, to Burke, the relation of thing to word is at least as complex and mysterious as the Trinity.”\textsuperscript{47} The mysteries inherent in theology mimic the mysteries of language.

Burke’s sixth analogy reminds us that the mystery of visual representation often mirrors the process of writing or filmmaking. Autobiographical documentary presents this process as its subject, often in the service of addressing concepts absent in Nature, like God. Burke’s close reading of Augustine’s \textit{Confessions} illustrates how the literate voice simultaneously writes and is written by the concept of God.

\textbf{Studies in Logology: Augustine’s \textit{Confessions}}

The task of unpacking Burke’s reading of \textit{Confessions} is unfortunately not one I’m able to exhaustively perform in this dissertation. Commentary on the second chapter of \textit{The Rhetoric of Religion} could comprise a two-volume set by itself. Only Roland Barthes’s reading of Balzac’s \textit{Sarrasine} in \textit{S/Z} exhibits a comparable level of intensity and detail.\textsuperscript{48} However, I will

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 29-31.

\textsuperscript{47} Rueckert, 259.

highlight the key aspects of Burke’s analysis to show how Augustine’s literate voice serves as model for a logology of autobiographical documentary.

Burke’s reading of *Confessions* does not try to reduce the events of Augustine’s life to philosophical or historical meaning. Instead, Burke outlines how Augustine chooses to represent his life through writing. He asks: what kind of words does Augustine consistently use throughout his autobiography? How can the etymologies of these words reveal the motivations of Augustine’s doctrine on conversion? How does Augustine structure the events of his life? Why does Augustine concentrate on certain events in his life more than others? How can seemingly insignificant events communicate significant information about the Self? Burke’s answers to these kinds of questions reveal both the precision and ambiguity of Augustine’s literate voice.

Some of what Burke discusses in the second chapter of *Rhetoric* parallels the ideas of Hayden White. White considers the literate aspects of historical narratives to emphasize the link between events and the written structures used to make them familiar. He explains that even the most seemingly objective examples of written history make use of figurative language (e.g. metaphor, metonymy). “Histories, then, are not only about events but also about the possible sets of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure.” Logology provides a method to chart these sets of relationships. Burke does not interpret the events of Augustine’s life, but instead shows how the language of *Confessions* works as symbolic action. White and Burke remind us that paying close attention to the literate voice of history remains a crucial aspect of historiographic technique.

Burke uses the etymology of Augustine’s words to demonstrate the vertical dialectic he mentions in the first chapter of *Rhetoric*. He explains, “personality, as an empirical concept, is

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composed of ingredients distributed among the three empirical orders (words about nature, words about the socio-political, words about words).” The terms we invent for “God” extend through analogies from these empirical orders (“the Upward Way”). However, the reverse may occur, where secular, empirical terms are “infused by the spirit” and modified by the term “God” (“the Downward Way”). Burke offers an example of this process when he considers the word “grace”:

Originally, in its Latin form, it had such purely secular meanings as: favor, esteem, friendship, partiality, service, obligation, thanks, recompense, purpose. Thus *gratis,* or *gratias* meant: “for nothing, without pay, through sheer kindness,” etc. . . . But in any case, once the word was translated from the realm of social relationships into the supernaturally tinged realm of the relationships between “God” and man, the etymological conditions were set for a reverse process whereby the *theological* term could in effect be *aestheticized,* as we came to look for “grace” in a literary style, or in the purely secular behavior of a hostess. Burke uses this constantly shifting vertical dialectic to reveal the motivations behind Augustine’s words—to show how the “fourth realm” of language (“god-terms”) might figure as a motive, even if not explicitly stated as such. Augustine’s autobiography functions as a bridge between the secular and theological realms of language.

Burke analyzes the placement and frequency of words in *Confessions.* He suggests that the beginning of the text expresses a theme of *innerness,* noting, “the work opens with an invocation, using various grammatical forms of the verb *invoco* eight times in twelve lines.” To emphasize Augustine’s “rhapsodic accountancy,” Burke then highlights both the frequency of prepositional *in’s* (e.g. *in* me, *in* Thee) and where forms of *impleo* (“fill”) appear seven times in fifteen lines in the next “stanza.” Finally, to clarify what he calls negative theology, Burke

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51 Ibid., 7-8.
52 Ibid., 51.
notices how Augustine’s writing uses forms of *in* of negation (e.g. incomprehensible, immutable). Such repetitiveness indicates how Augustine’s motives are symbolized and how thoroughly his use of negatives fit with the superlatives he employs to address God (e.g. highest, best, and most powerful).

The last word Augustine uses in his autobiography holds unique significance for Burke. He observes, “the last word of the *Confessions* is a verb meaning ‘it shall be opened.’” Burke considers the whole of *Confessions* and how the etymology of words relate to this last “sesame” word. In Book VI, Augustine recounts how Ambrose explains the passages of the Bible to him, laying open (*aperiret*) their true meaning “by removing the mystic veil” (*remote mystic velamento*). Later, Burke returns to this moment to point out how Augustine speaks of himself as being “killed by suspense” (*suspendio ... necabar*). The connection between the final term of *Confessions* and “suspense” emerges again in Book VIII when Augustine details a series of transformations or “turns.” Notable among these is when Augustine “hangs in suspense” (*pendebam*) between thought of his mistresses and an idealized Madonna-like figure, Continentia (Lady Continence). Eventually, Augustine “turns” from his mistresses (his “toys”) to Continentia, signifying one of countless moves from perversity to conversion in the text. This shift or “turn” embodies the crux of Burke’s entire analysis of *Confessions*. Most significantly in Book VIII, Augustine uses the strategic word “open” three times when his conversion takes place in the garden: the child’s voice commanding “Take up and read” (*tolle, lege*), when

53 Ibid., 58.
54 Ibid., 61.
55 Ibid., 62.
56 Ibid., 114.
Augustine opens the Bible (*aperui*), and finally when Alypius discloses (*aperuit*) his passage to Augustine.\(^57\)

Burke sets up the dialectical pair of perversion and conversion to convey the primary motivation of Augustine’s autobiography. However, rather than merely describe the episodes in which Augustine evolves from pagan rhetorician to Christian, he shows how the language of *Confessions* demonstrates this “turn.” Both perversity and conversion embody what Burke identifies as “the vert-family,” a series of words that demonstrate Augustine’s motives (the “turn”): adverse, diverse, reverse, perverse, eversion, avert, revert, advert, animadvert, universe etc.\(^58\) Burke notes where and when these words appear to reveal Augustine’s motives; his entire analysis hinges on the turn from perversity toward conversion. Burke conveys this dialectical relationship most effectively when he contrasts Augustine’s moment of conversion in the garden in Book VIII with an event in Book II that takes place sixteen years prior: Augustine’s theft of pears as a teenager.

Burke first analyzes Book II of *Confessions* in the form of the Quaestio in Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*.\(^59\) He asks why Augustine places such emphasis on the adolescent prank of stealing pears. The act seems insignificant when compared to Augustine’s other sins committed before his conversion to Christianity. Burke claims that the theft signifies a complete parody, or perverse imitation of Augustine’s religious motives. First, the theft parodies the original sin of Adam since its motivation stems not from gain, but from pure dedication to crime for its own sake. Next, the theft corresponds perversely to brotherhood with the Church since Augustine

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 63.

\(^{58}\) Ibid.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 93-97.
committed the act with a group of like-minded associates (other teenagers). Finally, Burke reminds us how Augustine stresses sexual concupiscence in *Confessions*. He suggests the imagery of the theft contains the hint of sexual motives. Augustine’s theft of the forbidden fruit parodies the ambiguous sexual connotations of the first transgressions in the Garden of Eden.

Burke’s reading of Book II shows how literate voice reveals the motivations of language. Working from the idea that “all things imitate God perversely (*perverse te imitantur*),” Burke demonstrates how perversity equals parody.60 “The theft parodies religious motives so Augustine’s discussion of it offers examples of puns, shifts, and other stylistic devices in which negatively charged words parody religious words.”61 The theft contains all of the motives attributed to perversion in *Confessions*. We do not need to supply motives—they exist in writing. The author is conscious of the act of writing, of selecting the words to create a mood or tone. However, Burke claims the author “cannot possibly be conscious of the interrelationships among all these equations. Afterwards, by inspecting [the author’s] work ‘statistically,’ we or [the author] may disclose by objective citation the structure of motivation operating here.”62 In other words, logology concerns itself with structures and how form reinforces those structures through literate voice. Robert Garlitz reiterates this point when he observes: “Whether [Burke] is emphasizing, or discounting, or both, in drawing attention to his interpretive presence, he is far more willing than conventional scholarship usually is to acknowledge how much our arguments and explanations are stylizations.”63 Thus, charting the stylizations of autobiographical

60 Ibid., 99.


62 Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 20.

63 Garlitz, 65.
documentary can uncover how literate voice persists in moving images. Style functions as an integral part of epistemology—it does not only serve an aesthetic purpose.

Burke later focuses on Augustine’s conversion in Book VIII of *Confessions*. He considers the difference between decision making and conversion by examining the structures of Shakespearean tragedies like *Othello*. Burke compares Augustine in the garden in Milan with Othello at the moment he decides to kill Desdemona. This example (and others, like Iago’s manipulation of Othello) supplies Burke’s reading of Book VIII with a “perverse” analogy to work with. Most importantly, Burke continues to locate terms in their structural contexts: where and when words appear, words in the vert-family, terms for *in* etc. Ultimately, the garden event resembles a *Trinitarian* conversion. Burke explains that prior to Book VIII, Augustine had only considered the relation between God and God’s creative word (the relation between Father and Son). In the garden, Augustine resolves the problem of love (Holy Spirit) by turning away from his corporeal mistresses and toward the figure of Continentia. Augustine transcends the idea of God as a corporeal being, rejects the teachings of Manichaeism and Neo-Platonism, and converts to the Father in the garden.

The structure of the trinity best describes the logic of identity that Augustine develops throughout *Confessions*. Continentia represents a figure “capable of straddling two identities, taking the role either of the Holy Spirit or of the Holy Mother, in exemplifying the principle of Maternal Love, conceived in the absolute.” Later in *Rhetoric*, Burke notes that Augustine endows the Holy Spirit (love) with maternal motives in Book XIII of *Confessions*. “This would include on one side the kind of responses that later writers would tend rather to express with

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65 Ibid., 115.
reference to Mary, and the kind of responses that in his personal relations would seem most directly associated with Monica.” For Burke, Book IX completes the Holy Spirit’s incorporation into Augustine’s psychic economy because, among other things, it addresses the death of Augustine’s mother, Monica. The book relays a conversation between Monica and Augustine shortly before her death. This conversation speculates on the nature of Augustine’s future life, and Burke describes the significance of nearly every word in it. Burke’s analysis shows how the maternal motive exemplifies Augustine’s views on the Holy Spirit (love).

Augustine discusses the trinity of the human mind: to be, to know, to will (esse, nosse, velle). Burke associates these elements with the corresponding concepts of the Trinity: power, wisdom, and love. Of particular importance is Augustine’s treatment of human will as synonymous with love and the Holy Spirit. Burke explains, “love has as its empirical analogue a condition of conflicting loves. . . . In Augustine’s case, such conflict was reduced primarily, though not wholly, to terms of sexual appetite.” Thus, Augustine’s willing sacrifice allows for his complete conversion in Book VIII. By turning his desire away from his mistresses and toward the matronly figure of Continentia, Augustine turns from the desire for flesh to the doctrine of God.

Book IX concludes the first part of Confessions (Books I-IX). The first nine books of Augustine’s autobiography differ significantly from the last four books (Books X-XIII). Burke views the first nine books as a personal account unfolding in a narrative sense (memories). The last four books resemble mediations on the nature or principles of memory, “a logological

66 Ibid., 169.

67 Ibid., 111.

68 Ibid., 167.
equivalent of a turn from ‘time’ to ‘eternity.’”

Burke notices that the very method of Augustine’s autobiography undergoes a kind of conversion or “turn” between the first nine and the last four books. In the latter half of Confessions, Augustine works through topics such as sensation and temptation, the temporal realm, the eternal drive, and the nature of beginnings. Augustine ponders the Creation as described in the opening chapters of Genesis, which leads Burke to offer his detailed reading of the first three books of Genesis in the third chapter of Rhetoric.

The First Three Chapters of Genesis & Epilogue: Prologue in Heaven

Ultimately, Augustine converts to the rhetoric of theological doctrine rather than to the will of a supernatural being. The appeal of Christianity’s language lies in its ability to convey a unifying Order. Whereas Confessions reenacts Augustine’s conversion symbolically, Burke’s logological analysis of the text demonstrates the cyclical trajectory of Augustine’s psychic economy. In the third chapter of Rhetoric, Burke turns toward a more general formation of logology, one that centers on the first three chapters of Genesis and the idea of Order. Relevant ideas in the chapter include: the tautological cycle of terms for Order, the sacrificial principle inherent in human action, and Burke’s distinction between narrative (rectangular) and philosophical (cyclical) styles.

The Creation story in Genesis deals with principles of governance. Burke focuses on the covenants in the first three chapters of Genesis as a way to work through the idea of Order in each of the four realms (Nature, sociopolitical, verbal, and supernatural). From the very start, the Creation story resembles “a statement of what the natural order must be like if it is to be a perfect

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69 Ibid., 124.

70 Ibid., 172-272.
fit with the conditions of human socio-political order (conditions that come to a focus in the idea of a basic Covenant backed by a perfect authority).”\textsuperscript{71} The first chapter of Genesis verbally classifies the realm of Nature by dividing the Creation into six days of work and one of rest (positioning “work/rest” as a dialectical pair). The verbal and sociopolitical realms are personalized and “the principle of human personality (which is at the very start identified with \textit{dominion}) has its analogue in the notion of God as a super-person, and of nature as the act of such a super-agent.”\textsuperscript{72} Burke establishes a connection between personality and symbol using, and he exposes how literate voice emerges in Genesis. The concept of the negative develops further in the second book of Genesis, as God gives the command to \textit{not} eat of a certain tree. Burke then suggests that the third book of Genesis offers the principle of mortification as a way to signify the physical phenomenon of death as a form of capital punishment. Although Adam and Eve do not die immediately after eating the forbidden fruit, their “return to dust” implies death as a form of social order.

Burke recognizes that Genesis organizes the terms for Order into narrative, and narratives allow for outcomes, for beginnings and endings. He identifies sacrifice as the primary motive of Genesis before examining how all human actions indicate a set of ultimate motives that correspond to Order. The narrative form of Genesis supports a cyclical order. Throughout Genesis (and the entire Bible), the same cycle is repeated: sin (fall) $\rightarrow$ guilt $\rightarrow$ victimage (sacrifice) $\rightarrow$ redemption. While Genesis narrativizes this cycle by providing temporal structures, all elements of the Order imply one another and can be reversed. Although Burke has some difficulty at times pinpointing exactly how sacrificial victimage relates to forms of narrative and

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 180.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 202.
logic, he does offer a number of examples that correspond to the relationship between time
(narrative) and eternity (philosophy).

Burke’s preoccupation with sacrifice can be understood in relationship to Confessions. He differentiates between narrative (rectangular) and philosophical (cyclical) styles and identifies these modes in the first nine and last four books of Confessions. The first nine books recall a narrative of Augustine’s life. The latter four books embody a more philosophical style that eschews a coherent linear narrative in favor of meditations on the nature of memory. Both parts of Confessions provide different ways of expressing Augustine’s life, and in the process, certain sacrifices take place. Augustine cannot say the same thing both narratively and philosophically at the same time. By telling some stories, others are omitted. Also, no philosophical work can include or address the sum of the various dialectics present within it.73 The process of writing is sacrifice. The third chapter of Rhetoric further reveals the connection between theological writing and the general nature of language. The rhetoric of religion, and of writing in general, materializes through the drive toward entelechy. Every discourse involves a tautological cycle of terms, and logology provides the method to trace their endless connections. Every writer sets out to prove the validity of his or her “god-term,” the principle that orders discourse.74

The final chapter of The Rhetoric of Religion presents a dialogue between The Lord and his negative, Satan. Burke begins with an introduction by the Impresario, who presents “Prologue in Heaven.” The conversation between The Lord and Satan covers many of the ideas in the preceding chapters of Rhetoric, but its tone and language offers a more humorous and

73 Garlitz, 101.
74 Ibid., 88.
accessible version of those ideas. Given the extremely dense theoretical style of the book’s first three chapters, it’s easy to forget that Kenneth Burke was a very witty personality. The “Prologue in Heaven” allows Burke to show a more personal view of logology that says much about his own literate voice.

**Heuristics: CATTt**

Rather than merely apply Burke’s ideas, the next two chapters of this dissertation extract the poetics of logology as a heuristic. Burke does not refer to moving images often in his work, so a logology of the moving image develops with this project. I first locate filmmaking as a form of writing to map its literate voice. Logology provides a way to analyze films as a form of knowledge, and my method draws on the generative properties of Gregory Ulmer’s CATTt as a starting point.

In *Heuristics: The Logic of Invention*, Ulmer compares André Breton’s “Surrealist Manifesto” with other classic works on method by Plato and Descartes. He finds that they all exhibit a common set of elements. These elements can be mnemonically referenced by the acronym CATTt:

- **C** = Contrast (opposition, inversion, differentiation)
- **A** = Analogy (figuration, displacement)
- **T** = Theory (repetition, literalization)
- **T** = Target (application, purpose)
- **t** = Tale (secondary elaboration, representability)

In selecting materials for each category of the CATTt, I am able to compose my own discourse on method. Ulmer explains, “the experiment is meant to be generalizable to other materials, the procedures transferable, with the CATTt functioning consistently across different contexts.”

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76 Ibid., 15.
Ulmer’s scholarship focuses on the apparatus shift from literacy to electry, and my future work follows a similar grammatological pursuit to ask: what happens to voice in electry? I address this question in more detail in the final chapter of this dissertation. For now, this project seeks to invent a logology of the moving image just as Breton invented surrealism or Plato invented dialectics—to do with Burke what Ulmer did with Derrida, or Breton with Freud. 77

**Contrast**

Ulmer defines contrast as a push away “from an undesirable example or prototype, whose features provide an inventory of qualities for an alternative method.” 78 The contrast in my CATTt includes those critical methods unconcerned with how writing orders the natural, sociopolitical, and verbal realms of language. New Criticism’s lack of interest in reader response, rhetoric, authorial intention, and the sociopolitical aspects of texts make it a strong contrast to my critical method. New Criticism’s neglect for the cultural led to its downfall in the wake of poststructuralism in the 1960s and 1970s. Surprisingly, some literary historians identify Burke as one of the originators of the movement. Although Burke’s work, at times, emphasizes empiricism and close attention to formal structure, he is not just a critic of literature. John Crowe Ransom reviewed *A Grammar of Motives* unfavorably in *The New Republic* in 1946, identifying Burke’s dialectic as a trick that detracts away from what is human and valuable. 79 Later in 1963, René Wellek remarked, “Burke’s charts, hierarchies, pentads, bureaucracies have nothing to do with literature.” 80 By the time Burke completed *The Rhetoric of Religion*, he had proved himself

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77 Ibid.

78 Ibid., 8.


adept in several disciplines including: linguistics, philosophy, sociology, and theology. His critical method concerns itself as a form of rhetoric; it inherently positions itself as a social form of knowledge that transcends literature and the aesthetic purism of the New Critics.

Burke called for an integration of technical and social criticism as early as *Attitudes Toward History*.81 While essays like William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s “The Intentional Fallacy” downplay the relevance of literate voice, Burke does quite the opposite.82 The structure of writing can only convey literate voice because meaning cannot precede the act of writing. What an author intends carries with it all the conventions of historical and sociopolitical systems. Literate voice signifies the attempt to create discourse in the absence of corporeal presence.

**Analogy**

Ulmer explains that “method becomes invention when it relies on analogy and chance.”83 The “god-terms” of autobiographical documentary find their *analogy* in the premises of dramatic writing. Lajos Egri chooses the word *premise* as the logical proposition a play or story demonstrates “because it contains all the elements the other words try to express and because it is less subject to misinterpretation.”84 If the leading motivation of *Othello* is *jealously* as Egri suggests, a logological assessment of Shakespeare’s tragedy might outline how its “god-term” (jealously) structures its form. We can also locate premise or “god-head” in Hollywood fiction.

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81 Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 331.


Orson Welles’s masterpiece, *Citizen Kane*, revolves around the “god-term” *Rosebud*; the film’s entire narrative structure and *mise-en-scène* reflect the motivation of Kane’s life. Egri’s insists that a premise must be “worded so that anyone can understand it as the author intended it to be understood.” Thus, clarity of interpretation has something to do with the creative structure of literate voice.

**Theory**

The *theory* element of the CATTt includes “in one register a literal repetition of a prior theory, modified, of course, by its interaction with the other elements of the CATTt.” The theory slot in my CATTt is, of course, occupied by Burke’s logology. However, rather than merely applying Burke’s method, I extract the poetics of his logology to invent a method to analyze moving images. The value in this practice resonates in locating moving images as both a form of writing and sociopolitical knowledge. The symbolicity of autobiographical documentary does not only function as a vehicle for artistic effect. Moving images can also embody, lead us to accept, or act as a corrective of literate voice.

**Target**

The *target* of the CATTt resembles an area of application, “often identifiable in terms of an institution whose needs have motivated the search for the method.” The target of my method includes those working on documentary studies, rhetoric and composition, grammatology, and autobiography in the academy. However, this project exists as the first part of a longer series of works, the second of which asks what replaces voice in electracy. In the long-term, the target of

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85 Ibid., 7.
87 Heath, 146.
this project will include all people using moving images as a form of argumentation to represent the Self. In the past, this group would have included professional documentarians. However, today, this encompasses everyone using moving images in networked environments for both social and business practices.

Tale

“The ‘t’ is the CATT’s tail/tale, reminding me that the invention, the new method, must itself be represented in some form or genre.”

Currently, this project takes the form of the traditional, literate humanities dissertation. However, once completed, it can live on in several incarnations. Most likely, its method will first be condensed into article form and submitted for publication. Then, after careful feedback, the project will be reworked into a book proposal and ideally published as a monograph by an academic press. Hopefully, the method proposed by my CATTt will transcend academia and be put into practice in electrate forms by non-academics. A logology of the moving image seeks to inform the rhetoric of writing, and technological progress demands that moving images count as a form of writing now more than ever.

89 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3
TIME INDEFINITE

Film as Writing

In this chapter, I use Kenneth Burke’s analysis of Confessions as a heuristic to illuminate the literate voice of autobiographical documentary. Burke’s reading of Augustine’s autobiography serves as a relay to map the literate motivations of moving images. I chart the literate voice of Ross McElwee’s Time Indefinite much in the same way that Burke traces the events of Augustine’s life in The Rhetoric of Religion. McElwee’s film pivots on the concept of mortality (Time Indefinite’s “god-term”) to convey ideas about the general function of documentary practice. I have structured my analysis around the poetics of autobiographical documentary introduced in Chapter Two: dialectic, negative, hierarchy, entelechy, and attitude. Each term prompts a different approach to reveal how Time Indefinite demonstrates mortality as its summarizing term.

Scholarship over the last century has chronicled the connection between film and writing, but not always in relationship to literate voice or the development of literacy. When Alexandre Astruc wrote of the age of caméra-stylo (camera-pen) in 1948, he conceived of the cinema as a language or mode of writing. While Astruc was among the first to suggest filmmaking as a form of philosophical writing, his work lacks two essential distinctions: specificity and method. He has trouble articulating exactly what he means when he identifies André Malraux’s L’Espoir (1945) as the first instance of equivalency between film language and literary language. How exactly can the cinema resemble a mode of thought, and what method can help us understand this? How can we clarify the relationships between human beings and objects to make the

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cinema a vehicle for thought? When Astruc claims, “Direction is no longer a means of illustrating or presenting a scene, but a true act of writing,” how exactly can we locate the difference between “the [person] who conceives the work and the [person] who writes it”?\(^2\)

Astruc calls for directors to write their own scripts, but does the negotiation of literate voice really end there? While Astruc unknowingly offers a preliminary cinematic vision of Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, the concept of literate voice remains undeveloped in his work on *caméra-stylo*.\(^3\)

The Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s suggested the practice of editing as a form of cinematic writing. Two decades before Astruc, Vsevolod Pudovkin wrote, “To the film director each shot of the finished film subserves the same purpose as the word to the poet.”\(^4\) Pudovkin suggests that films are built, not shot. The filmmaker/writer builds or writes by combining strips of celluloid into a structure. A single word/shot resembles a concept without essence, and individual elements only take structural form in conjunction with other words/shots. Pudovkin’s theory provides a more concrete approach toward film analysis than the notion of the camera as pen suggested by Astruc and the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics of the 1950s. In editing, the literal meaning of words and shots succumb to the organization of units into a coherent whole. However, exclusive emphasis on editing can lead to problems—the literal meaning of words and shots matters too. Obviously, one cannot substitute a shot of a person for a dog and expect the same result, especially in the context of structure. For example, virtual shot-for-shot remakes like Gus Van Sant’s *Psycho* (1998) demonstrate how substituting actors in iconic roles can produce

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\(^2\) Ibid., 35-36.


mixed results. Despite the importance of editing, *mise-en-scène* and cinematography also represent vital aspects of cinematic structure and literate voice.

Sergei Eisenstein also conceived of editing as a form of writing. While Pudovkin’s notion of montage promotes *linkage*, Eisenstein advocates an intellectual montage of *collision*, one where new ideas emerge from the conflict between individual shots (dialectic). In his canonical essay “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram,” Eisenstein discusses the representational hieroglyphic writing of Japan, pointing out that the combination of two hieroglyphs corresponds to a concept. He writes, “From separate hieroglyphs has been fused—the ideogram. By the combination of two ‘depictables’ is achieved the representation of something that is graphically undepictable.”5 The construction of the Japanese ideogram mirrors the process of montage, “combining shots that are *depictive*, single in meaning, neutral in content—into *intellectual* contexts and series.”6 Eisenstein extends his observations to the Japanese poetic forms of haikai and tanka, noting that both resemble hieroglyphs (images) transposed into phrases. The structuring of images generates a form of writing that produces concepts independent of individual words or shots.

The early Russian theorists also observed that silent films were organized verbally, not just through intertitles or mimed speech, but also in respect to the image itself.7 In 1927, Boris Eikhenbaum suggested that the cinema had not abandoned the verbal, but instead displaced it into a mental operation called *inner speech.*8 Inner speech corresponds to how a viewer

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6 Ibid.


8 Boris Eikhenbaum, “Problems of Film Stylistics,” *Screen* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1974): 7-32.
comprehends a film. While a reader of literature progresses from printed word to a visualization of a subject, the cinematic viewer processes images into words and concepts. Viewers name their experience by means of verbal metaphor and internally link together fragments of moving images to form concepts. Most importantly, the construction of inner voice has much to do with accessibility. If a viewer does not understand what they witness on screen, they risk not getting anything at all.

The films of Ross McElwee have received a fair amount of attention in film scholarship over the years. Many have pointed out that McElwee, perhaps more than most autobiographical documentarians, resembles a writer. McElwee even studied creative writing at Brown University before attending film school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1975. Most writing on McElwee’s formal style addresses the most apparent element of his literate voice: his voice-over narration. Many autobiographical documentaries employ voice-over written during post-production, and the style of the genre involves conjugating images with written voice-over reflection. McElwee’s voice-over narration possesses the command of a literary author; it directs how we negotiate on-screen events and provides access to internal dialogue. However, while McElwee’s voice-over dominates the narrative of his films, it constitutes only one element of his literate voice.

McElwee’s films often convey more about the capacity of the cinematic medium and philosophy than his conscious point of view. In regards to McElwee’s work, Patricia Hampl reminds us, “the self is not a source or a subject; it is an instrument.”

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may provide McElwee with material to work with in the “now” of filming, his literate voice emerges most explicitly after he has had time to reflect on his experiences behind the camera. The post-production stage allows Ross to process the interactions involved in autobiographical documentary production. Literate voice surfaces through the passage of time, contact with other people, and careful reflection on the capacities of the filmic medium. The literate voice of autobiographical documentary contains all the utterances of language under the guise of persona, a metaphor of the physical Self. Documentary filmmakers began to represent the Self more frequently in the late 1960s, and the next section offers a brief formal overview of this period in relationship to Ross McElwee’s work.

The Emergence of Autobiographical Documentary Form

Ross McElwee’s films signal a period of innovation in autobiographical documentary form. While Augustine invented the Western tradition of literate autobiography, McElwee refined the efforts of his documentary predecessors to cultivate a model for autobiographical voice-over narration. Before McElwee, documentary voice-over mostly existed either as “voice of god” exposition or as brief statements to describe on-screen events. Starting with his film *Backyard* (1984), McElwee’s voice-over began to address footage shot years earlier in a more philosophical way. Rather than using voice-over only to relay exposition, McElwee’s voice-over expresses the doubts and anxiety of constructing literate voice in the years after shooting has wrapped.

McElwee acknowledges the camera often, and his participatory or interactive presence takes distinctive shape in his most well-known documentary *Sherman’s March: A Meditation on the Possibility of Romantic Love in the South During an Era of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation*

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In the film, McElwee lays the formal groundwork for future participatory documentaries such as Michael Moore’s *Roger & Me* (1989). Although *Roger & Me* proved documentary features could have widespread appeal and generate enormous profits, *Sherman’s March* makes literate voice entertaining without resorting to Moore’s sensationalism. Despite the accessible nature of his work, McElwee employs rigorous, academic approaches to documentary practice influenced by the Cambridge tradition of visual anthropology and cinema vérité (or Direct Cinema). McElwee’s interactive style recalls the look of *David Holzman’s Diary* (1967), a film shot by a New Yorker who later remade Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* with Richard Gere in 1983. Strangely enough, the film is not entirely a documentary.

Jim McBride’s *David Holzman’s Diary* stars L. M. Kit Carson as David Holzman, a man who creates a visual diary to negotiate the uncertainties in his life. Holzman’s girlfriend, Penny (Eileen Dietz), refuses to be filmed, and she eventually leaves David because of his intrusive project. *Holzman’s* “lie” originates from its hybrid nature; the film exists simultaneously as fiction and nonfiction. It satirizes the early 1960s cinema vérité films of Ricky Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, and Robert Drew while providing a stylistic template for the later autobiographical documentaries of Miriam Weinstein, Ed Pincus, and McElwee. The film reveals the personal as political to illustrate how narrative fiction informs the process of documentary representation. Despite receiving early criticism from the audience at the 1968 San Francisco Film Festival, *Holzman’s Diary* has become a landmark in documentary history. Its influence also extends cross-nationally as filmmakers working outside of America have adopted the film’s blend of fiction and documentary. For example, the films of Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf,

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12 See MacDonald’s chapter on the emergence of personal documentary in *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary*, 127-166.
Figure 3-1. Direct address and filming in mirrors. A) and B) L. M. Kit Carson in *David Holzman’s Diary* (1967), C) Ross McElwee in *Sherman’s March* (1986), and D) McElwee in *Bright Leaves* (2003).

Ricardo Costa, and Cynthia Scott continue to inspire how we re-negotiate the boundaries between documentary and fiction.

*David Holzman’s Diary* gave birth to what Jim Lane calls the *journal entry* documentary, “a type of autobiography that involves the shooting of everyday events for a sustained period of time and the subsequent editing of these events into a chronological autobiographical narrative.”

Events may appear to occur in chronological order, but journal entry documentaries often incorporate several years of footage shot out of sequence. McElwee began to develop his

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13 Lane, 33.
own journal entry style while studying at the MIT Film Section from 1975 to 1977. Leacock (along with Pincus) ran MIT’s film program from 1969 to 1987, and much of the foundation for autobiographical documentary style was forged during that period. Leacock and Pincus, along with filmmakers like Jeff Kreines, helped pioneer the genre’s form during the early 1970s.

Leacock’s *A Visit to Monica* (1974) marks a shift toward more personal work for the cinema vérité pioneer, while Kreines’s *The Plaint of Steve Kreines as Recorded by His Younger Brother Jeff* (1974) documents the director’s brother as he moves out from his parent’s house. Kreines’s film remains long unavailable, but its historical importance cannot be emphasized enough. *The Plaint of Steve Kreines* uses a one-person film crew to capture the seemingly ordinary events of daily life, a first for autobiographical documentary features at the time.

Leacock and his colleagues developed a low-cost alternative to 16mm filmmaking at the MIT Film Section. They designed prototypes for synchronous sound Super-8 cameras and unleashed an accessible model of filmmaking for their students. Leading the charge was Ed

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14 See MacDonald’s history of the MIT Film Section in *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary*, 142-149. Ross McElwee also recalls his time at MIT in his essay “Finding a Voice,” in *Landscapes of the Self: The Cinema of Ross McElwee*, 244-248.
Pincus, whose film *Diaries* (1971-76) (1982) adopts the one-person model of Kreines’s *The Plaint of Steve Kreines* to document life with his wife and two children over five years. *Diaries* clearly influenced how McElwee would later create his work, but films like *Time Indefinite* and *Photographic Memory* further develop the template provided by Pincus and others. McElwee recalls, “*Diaries* was technically brilliant and emotionally courageous, but ultimately, even though the film was effectively about Ed, there wasn’t enough of Ed in his diaries to satisfy me fully.”\(^{15}\) McElwee desired to know more about what the autobiographical subject thinks and feels about the process of writing one’s life cinematically. In other words, he acknowledged that the literate voice of the filmmaker proved invaluable to the production of autobiographical documentary. While preparing *Sherman’s March*, McElwee conceived of his literate voice as a kind of authorial voice. “This authorial voice would inhabit the film, haunt it and propel it. It would communicate itself through an amalgam of devices.”\(^{16}\) These devices include a hand-held camera to indicate a connection between the filmmaking process and the viewer, the absence of

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\(^{15}\) McElwee, “Finding a Voice,” 246.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 256.
a filmmaking crew to signal a solitary presence, voice-over narration delivered conversationally to reflect on past events in the present tense, and monologues with the camera. 

Holzman’s Diary and the films of Pincus and Kreines were not the only early influences on autobiographical documentary form. Personal experimental works by filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, Carolee Schneemann, and Jonas Mekas also played a prominent role in how literate voice developed in autobiographical moving images.\(^\text{17}\) While not perceived as autobiographical

\(^{17}\) MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary*, 129-130. Also see Michael Renov’s “The Subject in History: The New Autobiography in Film and Video,” *Afterimage* 17, no. 1 (Summer 1989): 4-7. Renov discusses the work of Mekas, Ilene Segalove, and Lynn Hershman Leeson in relationship to autobiographical form.
documentaries by some, films such as Brakhage’s *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) offer a glimpse into the personal lives of filmmakers via literate voice. Brakhage’s film documents his wife Jane giving birth to a daughter and relies on expressive montage to relay the affect and anxiety of personal experience. The personal experimental style of filmmakers like Brakhage has permeated the limits of what counts as autobiographical documentary today. One need look no further than the works of Caveh Zahedi, Joshua Yates, Jonathan Caouette, or Amie Siegel to see how experimental film and video has influenced autobiographical documentary form.

In addition to the filmmakers at the MIT Film Section, ethnographic filmmakers from the Cambridge area also made an impression on McElwee early in his career. Scott MacDonald suggests that ethnographic film and personal documentary function as the inverse of each other, an observation he traces back to the dawn of film. Early “films of exploration” like Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926) share a connection to city symphonies like Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) because despite their obvious formal differences, both genres embrace the modernity of the cinematic medium. In the Cambridge area, ethnographic filmmakers like John Marshall, Robert Gardner, and Timothy Asch regularly collaborated with and influenced personal filmmakers such as Alfred Guzzetti, Robb Moss, and McElwee. In the late 1970s, McElwee worked as a camera operator on John Marshall’s *N!ai, the Story of a !Kung Woman* (1980). The film portrays N!ai, a Ju!hoan woman who relays the history of the Kalahari Desert region over a thirty year period through her own personal story. Fittingly, many scholars have pointed out that McElwee’s films resemble what Michael

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18 MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary*, 129.

19 Ibid.
Renov calls *domestic ethnography*, “a mode of autobiographical practice that couples self-interrogation with ethnography’s concern for the documentation of the lives of others.”²⁰ For Renov, domestic ethnography addresses people genetically linked to the autobiographical subject and must carefully negotiate the reciprocal nature of the autobiographical Self. Nearly all of McElwee’s films address some aspect of his family, hence the association between his work and domestic ethnography.

**The Literate Voice of Ross McElwee**

Ross McElwee maintains a complex persona in his films, and no one aspect of it signifies his definitive Self. Many have pondered the multiple versions of McElwee. For example, Efrén Cuevas distinguishes between McElwee the “loser” and the more intimate McElwee who often raises philosophical questions.²¹ Cuevas connects McElwee’s loser persona with the use of ironic voice-over, a device most clearly employed in *Sherman’s March*. Paul Arthur reaffirms Cuevas’s observation when he suggests that McElwee’s persona in *Sherman’s March* promotes an


“aesthetics of failure,” a set of ironic cues in documentaries of the mid-to-late 1980s that are “organized around a set of strategies in which authority and verisimilitude are rhetorically embedded in a negative register of denial, mockery, and collapse.” However, literate voice also expresses another side of persona, one conveyed through the formal technique of autobiography. McElwee’s literate voice reveals aspects of his Self that perhaps remain unknown to him. Film style speaks in ways that may contradict the spoken, conscious voice.

During his undergraduate years at Brown, McElwee studied literary voice with novelist John Hawkes. As Ross grew more interested in filmmaking, he began to think of documentary as a way to combine his interest in photography and non-fiction writing. While he admired Direct Cinema filmmakers like Frederick Wiseman and Leacock, McElwee noticed that their films lacked the kind of voice Hawkes taught at Brown. Observational documentary demands that the filmmaker attempt to conceal their voice and pretend to be invisible. While McElwee remained interested in the style of Direct Cinema, he realized, “the paradox became how to find a voice in a field which by definition seemed to demand that the filmmaker remain silent.”

McElwee discovered a vital aspect of his literate voice when he began writing voice-over narration for his films. When asked how he decides what to say in his narrations, he replied:

> Occasionally I take notes on location, so to speak. An idea about something I’ve just filmed might pop into my head and I’ll jot it down on a scrap of paper. But ninety percent of my writing is done ex post facto. After a certain point in the editing process, I begin editing with a word processor and a tape deck on the table beside me. I watch the footage and type out various responses to it. I then make sound recordings of the narrations and play them back as the scene runs.

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Obviously, writing informs McElwee’s voice-over. He has admitted that composing each voice-over narration takes him hundreds of hours of revision for each film. However, voice-over comprises only one part of his literate voice. The arrangement of images in a particular sequence is also part of writing. Likewise, the structure of multiple shots can reveal patterns and familiar images that signify writing. All aspects of cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, and editing potentially encompass literate voice.

The political and philosophical effects of formal decisions also constitute literate voice, even if they escape the consciousness of the autobiographical subject. McElwee suggests every camera movement is a political statement. He explains, “You’ve got to be aware of the political implications of every camera movement, every edit, every decision to shoot as opposed to not shoot when it’s real life that you’re filming.” Literate voice does not signify the ideological or theoretical meaning of texts, but instead exposes the conscious and unconscious motivations inherent in writing. Logology provides the method to chart these motivations as a form of inquiry, not meaning.

Rather than simply documenting historical narrative, McElwee’s films instead exhibit what Lucy Fischer calls *hysterical* narrative. Hysterical narrative navigates the boundaries of fiction/nonfiction to interrogate documentary form. Some have connected McElwee’s

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28 Lucia, 33-34.

metacommentary on the process of writing/filming to the essay film. For example, Renov relates the essayistic to the literary modes of Michel de Montaigne and Roland Barthes, calling attention to films and videos that explore enunciation or the process of inscription.\(^30\) While McElwee’s work does not resemble the more experimental film essays of Chris Marker, Chantel Akerman, or Godard, his films do engage the devices of rhetoric to reflect upon historiography. In fact, most of McElwee’s documentaries reaffirm Dominick LaCapra’s observations on how rhetoric motivates the writing of history.\(^31\) At the very least, McElwee’s films address the dialogism between the author and the historical world, the performative use of visual language, the encounter between other voices and the literate Self, and the political, cultural, and social contexts of literate voice. His films also often foreground the process of writing as their subject.

McElwee primarily works alone, and his oeuvre represents a unique case study to appraise literate voice. His films eschew the collaborative process most films require, including many autobiographical documentaries. Since McElwee maintains a level of control, some may believe he knows exactly what he wants to say before filming begins, or that he controls how his films speak. However, the auteur/writer has minimal control over how literate voice signifies to others. All films evoke the unknown; they rely on the element of surprise or accidents to some degree. Charles Warren addresses the element of surprise in McElwee’s films, noting the parallel between them and the unpredictable, experiential process of Montaigne’s writing.\(^32\) Most importantly, Warren identifies the “speaking” in McElwee’s films not as his spoken voice, but

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how he navigates surprise through writing: structuring, deciding what to include and omit, making transitions, and building an argument through visuals. The unplanned images of McElwee’s life illustrate how literate voice can circumvent conscious intention and meaning.

Godard once said in an interview, “Writing was already a way of making films, for the difference between writing and directing is quantitative not qualitative.” McElwee’s films serve as useful objects of study to analyze the continuity between writing (discourse) and filmmaking. For example, Gregory Ulmer demonstrates the levels of discourse at work in Sherman’s March by using the film as a relay for his concept of mystory, a genre that integrates private experience, popular culture, and disciplinary discourse (orality, literacy, and videocy). Ulmer identifies how McElwee’s literate voice unites three different levels of sense, ranging from low to high. First, McElwee’s effort to retrace the route of General Sherman’s march resembles a remake of his family album (personal). Next, McElwee enters the marriage broker process, using it to find a “star” for his film (popular). Ross’s fascination with General Sherman as a young boy integrates itself into his identity, and his identification with Sherman finds its parallel through the fan worship of Burt Reynolds, the ideal Southern man. Thus, the star system contributes to both the externalization and institutionalization of identity formation. Finally, Sherman’s March concerns McElwee’s status as an academic at Harvard (disciplinary discourse). McElwee appropriates the theme of nuclear catastrophe (metaimage, historical event) to reflect on his personal experience in the present. The use of the Bomb demonstrates how disciplinary discourse engages the personal and popular registers to demonstrate the role that legend and myth play in thought.

33 Jean-Luc Godard, Godard on Godard, ed. and trans. Jean Narboni and Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 171.

34 Ulmer, Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video, 229-237.
Ulmer’s reading of Sherman’s March shows how both educational discourse and myth/legend affect McElwee’s identification.

Next, I provide a close reading of McElwee’s Time Indefinite to demonstrate logology in action. The film’s “god-term,” mortality, directs its literate voice, and my analysis establishes how the concept of death anchors the film through both form and content. Although McElwee explicitly refers to death throughout the film, Time Indefinite’s literate voice performs mortality in several ways. Furthermore, McElwee’s film recalls Augustine’s Confessions in that it addresses (among other things): the ineffable (God), the death of a mother, and the lifelong struggle to realize entelechy. Most importantly, Ross experiences his version of Augustine’s garden conversion during an encounter with a door-to-door Jehovah’s Witness and his daughter. My close reading works from the poetics of literate voice outlined in Chapter Two to show how mortality orders dialectic, negative, hierarchy, entelechy, and attitude in Time Indefinite.

**Time Indefinite: Dialectic**

*Time Indefinite* documents the period of McElwee’s life from the announcement of his engagement to filmmaker Marilyn Levine to the birth of his first child, Adrian. During this time, McElwee sadly loses his father and grandmother. Marilyn also suffers a miscarriage before giving birth to Adrian. Rather than merely retelling the moments of his life, McElwee uses literate voice to compose his philosophical reflections on mortality. *Time Indefinite* communicates something profound about the nature of life and death through its form. While the narrative of McElwee’s life fascinates us, the film’s masterful composition signals a transition or turn from adolescence to adulthood (life to death). *Time Indefinite* does not just tell us about mortality; it demonstrates its processes through McElwee’s literate voice.

The film opens with an extreme long shot of a beach on the coast of North Carolina. Two boys on bicycles ride toward the left of the frame as the shadow of a pier looms over them.
Figure 3-6. *Time Indefinite* (1993) – Opening shot.

McElwee explains in voice-over that although his immediate family has never fully accepted his decision to move to the Cambridge area to work as a filmmaker, he returns to North Carolina for a family reunion every summer to see them. The pier on the beach in the opening shot functions as a place of transition, a location where elements of the film’s dialectic collide. If Augustine turned from perversion to conversion in *Confessions*, McElwee’s autobiography sets up a reciprocal turn from death to life, or more specifically from writing (filming) to experiencing life off-camera.

The film establishes several dialectical pairs, all of which equate filmmaking with a turn away from the entelechy that McElwee’s strives for (marriage, fatherhood, stability). McElwee’s journey from childless bachelor to married father involves several turns in the film:

- **Birth/Death:** The most fundamental dialectical pair engages the cycle of life and death of McElwee’s family. The birth of Adrian contrasts the death of McElwee’s father, mother, younger brother, and grandmother. The death of Charleen Swansea’s ex-husband Jim also plays a role in the cycle.

- **Living Off-Camera/Filming:** McElwee must decide to abandon his compulsion to film the moments of his life in order to realize entelechy in the form of marriage and fatherhood—a life beyond documentation.

- **Videotape/Film:** The film establishes a contrast between McElwee’s use of 16mm and 35mm film and the “family albums” shot on 8mm and videotape by members of his family. This opposition relates to the occupational dialectic of doctor/filmmaker or amateur/professional.
Doctor/Filmmaker: McElwee comes from a family of doctors (grandfather, father, brother). The job of physician contrasts with McElwee’s chosen profession of filmmaker. This occupational dialectic also relates to a geographic dialectic between North Carolina (South) and Cambridge (North). McElwee works at Harvard University (North) while his father and brother practice medicine in Charlotte, North Carolina (South).

North Carolina (South)/Cambridge (North): The division between North and South formulates a dialectic in most of McElwee’s films. Geography motivates the expectations of career and family.

Married/Single: McElwee must turn from bachelorhood to fatherhood and change his identification with filming.

Father/Son: McElwee’s films recount an endless tautological cycle of fathers and sons: birth and death (Dr. McElwee/Ross, Ross/Adrian). Filmmaking preserves the Self after the physical body expires.

McElwee’s camera and voice-over express two levels of discourse recorded at separate intervals. His images provide raw material (Nature) for voice-over reflection years later. However, McElwee also structures his footage in a particular way to illuminate the dialectic of mortality: he incorporates home movie footage of those passed (resurrecting the dead), includes images of death (mostly fish), and frames shots motivated by religious imagery (a meditation on the return to dust). *Time Indefinite* also exhibits a light-heartedness during its first half before turning to address the death in McElwee’s life. The film’s movement (its literate turn) proves vital to reading its “god-term.” McElwee discusses the importance of motion (vs. stillness) while describing a scene from *Sherman’s March* where Phil, a mechanic, talks about losing his daughter to cancer:

> The fleeting pain in his eyes is for me one of the most moving moments in the film. In the editing room, I once tried to find the frame or frames that seemed to communicate that pain. I ran the shot in slow motion through the Steenbeck, freeze-framing various frames, trying to locate it, that moment where his gaze really pierces you, I could not find it. It’s too evanescent. It exists only in the movement of the frames, or between the frames, and it haunts the rest of the scene.”

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Movement, or the transition signaled by the turn, enters a new dimension in the cinematic. Burke identifies the master tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) as figures of speech that alter direction. The cinematic turn (as trope) ultimately culminates as attitude in the literate voice of autobiographical documentary. Attitude incorporates all the elements of literate voice, the first of which is dialectic.

McElwee follows the opening shot of *Time Indefinite* with footage of his family reunion. The reunion anticipates McElwee’s drive toward entelechy through the image of his brother Tom’s young child. The visible happiness of McElwee’s father at the sight of his new grandchild prefigures Ross’s impending engagement announcement (the first step toward entelechy) and indicates a desire for approval from his father (when will he and Marilyn have a child?). Babies
(life, birth) appear throughout the film: at Ross’s wedding, in his dreams (a figurative Baby City), at the gynecologist, at the second reunion at the conclusion of the film (a literal Baby City), and, of course, the birth of Adrian.

McElwee develops the film’s dialectic through several images of baby cribs in anticipation of his first child. A series of four medium shots of cribs introduces a scene where Ross and Marilyn shop for baby supplies. Most significantly, the framing of each shot recalls a familiar image repeated throughout the film’s *mise-en-scène*, one that evokes the ineffable. In voice-over, McElwee recalls the mysterious power of the pier located a few hundred yards from the beach house his family rents each summer. As a child, McElwee’s father took him to the pier. As Ross continues to talk, he cuts to a long shot underneath the pier. Although McElwee shoots the pier from several angles in the film, this long shot conveys unique significance. The shot
frames the pier as a gateway or hallway to the unknown. McElwee associates the space underneath the pier with an exotic temple or cathedral—a metaphysical location of worship and reflection. Much like a church, the pier allows visitors like Ross to feel close to what language cannot capture: God, spirit, and the dialectic of life and death. The vanishing point of the shot leads into the ocean, an unknown region where the ashes of the dead return to Nature (metaphysical resurrection). Both the image of the pier and the shots of the cribs signify birth. The cribs anticipate Ross and Marilyn’s unborn child, and the pier functions as a site of metaphysical awakening. However, death also haunts the images. The cribs remind us of Marilyn’s miscarriage (the baby not born), and McElwee later connects the pier to the death of

Figure 3-10. *Time Indefinite* – The image of the ineffable. A) The pier, B) Charleen’s house, and C) the bridge to the creek.
fish. Ross experiences the dialectic of life and death at the pier, and he tries to illustrate this encounter with his camera and through voice-over.

The shot of the pier establishes a familiar image that reappears throughout the film. For example, as McElwee climbs the steps to his friend Charleen’s house, the framing of his point-of-view shot evokes the composition of the pier shot. Conversations with Charleen often resemble a kind of confession for McElwee in his films; the two friends regularly talk about the details of life and death (e.g. family members who have died, the birth of children, and new relationships). Ross approaches the steps with apprehension as Charleen waits patiently at the top of the deck. The steps indicate passage to a place where McElwee can discuss mortality with a friend who has accepted the presence of his camera for years. Later, as Ross and Charleen contemplate scattering Jim’s ashes into a creek leading to the ocean, a long shot from a bridge also recalls the shot of the pier. Like the pier shot, the vanishing point of the shot from the bridge extends into the sea. Death and metaphysical resurrection engage the presence of water at both the pier and the bridge, a pattern also visible in the imagery of dead fish throughout the film.

On top of the pier, fathers and sons take part in the ritual of fishing. McElwee recalls his metaphysical development through fishing with his father. As a young boy, he asked his father, “Does a fish have a soul?” “Can a fish sin?” and “Why does anyone or anything have to die?”
McElwee cuts to a long shot of a young boy on top of the pier with his father. The boy stands over a dying fish as his father instructs him to crush its head. The shot looks out onto the ocean like the shot under the pier, its *mise-en-scène* recalling a ritual at the altar of a church or temple. The image of the father and his son suggests McElwee’s childhood experience at the pier extends to others. Furthermore, the pier’s religious connotation recalls the divine Father and Son. The father/son shot functions as a scene of transition where a series of turns occur: from life to death (the fish) and from childhood to adulthood (the boy learns about mortality). McElwee continues the father/son cycle and takes his own son Adrian to the pier, an event later evidenced in *Bright Leaves* (2003).

McElwee returns to both the shot underneath the pier and the image of the father and son later in the film. If the pier signified metaphysical birth for McElwee as a child, the return to the pier as an adult elicits a confession associated with death. Ross explains that death pays a visit to his immediate family every ten years before he cuts again to the shot underneath the pier. He then recounts the tragic death of his younger brother Robert in a motorboat accident. The pier communicates something different in this scene; instead of life, the pier connects water to death, anger, and helplessness. Next, Ross speaks of his mother’s death from breast cancer ten years after Robert’s passing. McElwee then returns to the long shot of the father and his son on top of the pier before cutting to a close-up shot of the boy’s dying fish. Ross describes how he feels connected to the fish in a vague, inexplicable way. This feeling reveals itself in the final breaths of the fish, but Ross cannot explicitly state what it is. Perhaps what McElwee alludes to as vague and inexplicable is the ineffable. His camera’s capacity to record the transition from life to death creates an affect inexpressible through language.
Mary Ann Doane describes death as one of the most intractable of contingencies and reminds us the cinematic image functions as both record and performance. While the image of the fish appears to exist as a direct record of death, we must remember that the cinema structures time. Early films of the late 1800s and early 1900s offered seemingly unmediated footage of death, and images of mortality eventually found their way into the fictional narratives that followed the early work of the Lumières and Edison. However, Doane points out that even the early actualities bear the markings of structure or narrativization. The 1903 Edison film *Electrocuting an Elephant* (presumably shot by Edwin S. Porter) depicts the death of Topsy, an elephant electrocuted as punishment for killing three men. The film contains a jump cut where “uneventful” footage is omitted (dead time). Thus, what appears as the pure event of death succumbs to the structure of cinema. Doane explains that despite the jump cut, *Electrocuting the Elephant* and other representations of death can only function as aspirations to represent “real time.” The screen deaths of Topsy and the fish on the pier do not provide moments of actual death, but its sign. Even the footage omitted in the jump cut in *Electrocuting an Elephant*

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Figure 3-13. *Time Indefinite* — Images of death. A) The fish on the pier, B) red snapper at Ricky Leacock’s place, and C) lobsters at Ross’s wedding.

contributes to a conceptualization of the *event* as a marker of time existing between contingency (i.e. the ephemeral) and structure. McElwee’s shot of the fish promotes a concept of mortality; death is not merely an event, but a series of complicated structures woven throughout *Time Indefinite*. Death anchors McElwee’s literate Self; it offers a model to negotiate mortality not as an event, but as a concept.

Seafood signifies death often in *Time Indefinite*. The dialectic of life and death plays out not only in the image of the dying fish on the pier, but also in the shots of the red snapper at Ricky Leacock’s place and the lobsters prepared for Ross and Marilyn’s wedding. In these images, the dialectic comes full circle as the turn of fish from life to death provides sustenance for the living. The repetition of fish also connects mortality to the pier and water. But why so
many dead fish? McElwee’s shot of the dying fish offers what Vivian Sobchack calls the professional gaze, a look that negotiates the boundary between duty and ethical action. The shot raises ethical questions about mortality and documentary. Why doesn’t Ross help the fish? Is the fish’s life worth the shot? Does Ross need the shot to convey his thoughts on mortality most effectively? Was the fish incapable of resurrection when Ross took the shot? These kinds of questions also elicit other concerns about who or what dies on camera. Obviously, McElwee could not have attempted the same death shot with a person. But what about a dog who begins to die after colliding with a car? In this light, the image of the fish invites a series of ethical dilemmas. When does one turn from journalistic duty or art toward humanitarian responsibility? Who or what determines this responsibility? Does the cost of knowledge or experience outweigh the ethical rights of animals? Does a fish have a soul?

The closest Time Indefinite comes to depicting human mortality as pure event occurs when McElwee cuts to shots of people in “death” beds. These beds exist in hospitals and nursing homes; they function as a visual contrast to the baby cribs earlier in the film. For example, McElwee incorporates footage from Backyard of his father talking to a bedridden patient while reflecting on Marilyn’s pregnancy. As Ross prepares to become a dad, he begins to think more about his own father. Following his father’s death, Ross returns to the hospital to film his brother Tom at work. Ross’s brother has already begun to take care of his father’s patients (an occupational transition from father to son). Tom attends to a patient who has denied a breast cancer the size of a cantaloupe for years. McElwee cuts to a slide of the cancer and holds the shot for over a minute. Ross uses the image of the cancer to talk about denial, both the patient’s denial

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Figure 3-14. Death beds. A) Ross’s father attends to a patient in *Backyard*, and B) and C) Ross’s brother with patients in *Time Indefinite*.

Figure 3-15. *Time Indefinite* – The breast cancer.

of her cancer and the general tendency of people to deny their own impending deaths.

MacDonald identifies this moment as the final turning point in the film: “a shift from a focus on death to a focus of life (the fact that Tom’s patient actually is *not* dead but will be going home
the next day is a premonition of this shift).” While I agree with MacDonald’s point, the film also conceives of life beyond the reality of lived experience, the index, the pure event.

*Time Indefinite: Negative*

Every movement and image in *Time Indefinite* always signifies what it is not: the realm of Nature. The cinema is not real life but the mediation of lived experience—a form of writing. Pudovkin calls every object shown on screen a *dead object*, despite the fact that it once moved before the camera’s lens. The movement on the screen is not the same movement before the screen. Ross’s transition into adulthood also could have been any number of other turns. He could have approached mortality in a different way. Autobiographical documentary, like all forms of writing, indicates an absence tied to mortality. However, filmed subjects live on after physical death. McElwee explains

> the present that is captured on film is, I guess, the corpse of the present. That’s one way to think about it. Yet you’re performing not only an act of observation of something that’s expired. You’re also trying to bring it back to life again . . .
> Shooting large amounts of footage, assembling it in an editing room years later, and then trying to restore some version of the life that you feel is due to it, that you feel relates to how you experienced it at that time. It’s a little, in that way, like medicine. In some metaphorical way, you are trying to revive the patient, to bring the patient back to life.⁴⁰

McElwee further complicates the autobiographical process by using footage from previous films in *Time Indefinite*, adding new contexts to footage already cinematically revived. The film also undergoes a digital revival through conversion to DVD and online streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. *Time Indefinite* will continue to live on digitally long after the original 35mm negative disintegrates. The cinema always signifies death because it can never

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³⁸ MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary*, 216.

³⁹ Pudovkin, 24.

embody lived experience, but it also allows those subjects captured by the camera to undergo resurrection.41

The world before the camera represents motion while what we do with it constitutes action. Burke explains that “action involves character, which involves choice; and the form of choice attains its perfection in the distinction between Yes and No (between thou shalt and thou shalt not).”42 Action implies the human personality. The concept of the negative only exists in language, and what McElwee chooses not represent directly (human death as pure event) communicates just as much as what he does. However, the realism of documentary often makes the negative easy to overlook. One of the more intense moments in Time Indefinite comes when Ross visits his grandmother in a nursing home with his aunt Janice. Sadly, Ross’s grandmother illustrates human death and frailty. She sits in a chair with a blanket (another “death” bed) and has lost the ability to speak coherently. McElwee’s grandmother has been important in his life, and he explains that she has expressed disappointment in his reluctance to get married. Ross goes to tell his grandmother of his marriage to Marilyn. The aunt and nephew continue to talk to their elder loved one, and she seems gratified by the good news. As Ross and Janice leave the nursing home, an eerie light emits from outside. After the glow dissipates, McElwee captures a long shot of farmland beyond the nursing home’s parking lot. Although the shot’s mise-en-scène does not obviously resemble the image of the pier, it seems to emit a similar calmness. The shot of the farmland, along with the strange glow that envelops Janice as she exits through the door, provides a brief transcendental moment. In some way, the shot seems to convey the happiness


42 Burke, The Rhetoric of Religion, 41.
Ross’s grandmother cannot express with her physical voice. Ross does not record his grandmother’s death later on camera, but this scene offers a more complex image of mortality: death as a journey toward acceptance and peace.

Although Ross’s grandmother cannot communicate with her physical voice, her presence in *Time Indefinite* allows for a kind of resurrection via literate voice. The film later revives her speech after Ross receives word of her death. He cuts to footage from *Backyard* of his grandmother singing the 1899 song “Stay in Your Own Backyard” (Lyn Udall w/ Karl Kennett). The tune was a hit for Louise Dressler on the vaudeville circuit and one of the first pop songs to deal with racial segregation. As she sings, Ross laments in voice-over that his future child will never know its grandmother. The recycled footage from *Backyard* reminds us that the cinema
always addresses death and mortality—the time it represents has already passed. Despite André Bazin’s claim that the cinema asserts a kind of physical presence of “having been there” via the trace, filmmaking somehow always signifies loss and absence, or the desire to preserve who or what has died.⁴³

Death materializes vis-à-vis moving images and still photographs in very distinctive ways. *Time Indefinite* contains only two still photographs as the focus of any one shot: the slide of the breast cancer and the image of Ross and Marilyn on their honeymoon in Italy. Although Charleen refers to a photo of Jim, and images of horses in Ross’s motel room look like photographs, the breast cancer and honeymoon photos hold unique significance. Both photos epitomize the negative; they act as a substitute for what they are not: real life or *moving* images that represent reality. The breast cancer slide is *not* the diseased patient’s living body, and the honeymoon photo indicates the trip Ross does *not* film. Still photographs later play an important role in *Photographic Memory*; the film’s entire “god-term” stems from Ross’s desire to resurrect the pastness of photographs. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes suggests the photograph signals the actual or potential death of a person, while moving images deteriorate the *noeme* (or pose) of the

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photograph through motion.\textsuperscript{44} The \textit{punctum} of the photograph represents its essential component, extraneous to its intended purpose. According to Barthes, the \textit{punctum} also gets lost in the shuffle in moving pictures, but some disagree. Early scholars and filmmakers like Jean Epstein remind us that the cinema consists entirely of still photographs and merely produces the \textit{appearance} of movement—transforming discontinuity into continuity.\textsuperscript{45} The recovery of the \textit{punctum} in moving images may involve the process of slowing down or stopping cinematic motion.

In thinking about death and movement (or lack thereof), Laura Mulvey investigates how technology allows us to slow down and freeze the cinema’s movement.\textsuperscript{46} If the movement of cinema represses the visible materiality of individual frames (and the \textit{punctum}), the ability to slow or stop motion reverses the process. She claims the \textit{pensive spectator} stops a film to discover its \textit{punctum}. Mulvey offers the example of Douglas Gordon’s installation \textit{24-Hour Psycho} (1993), a work that electronically slows down Hitchcock’s 1960 film from ninety minutes to twenty-four hours.\textsuperscript{47} She explains that Gordon accidentally discovered the beauty of \textit{Psycho} (its \textit{punctum}?) when he reversed his VHS copy of the film to freeze-frame the scene where Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) watches Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) through a peephole. In many ways, a logology of the moving image also relies on technology for its practice. I never would have managed to view \textit{Time Indefinite} over thirty times and produce over 120 screen captures without the advances made in digital technology in the last few decades.

\textsuperscript{44} Barthes, \textit{Camera Lucida}, 78.

\textsuperscript{45} Jean Epstein, “Magnification and Other Writings,” \textit{October} 3 (Spring 1977): 22.


\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 101-103.
The materiality of film also exposes the negative in *Time Indefinite*. The visual makeup of the majority of the film (35mm), contrasts sharply to footage shot on 8mm, 16mm, and video. We notice the shifts (turns) in medium specificity throughout the film. Ross physically appears in front of the camera for the first time in videotape footage shot by his stepmother Ann. The absence of visible grain in the videotape footage reminds us that any cinematic representation could always have been something else: another medium, another composition, or from another point of view. The 35mm footage carries an association with Ross’s profession (cost and skill), while the videotape footage aligns itself with the amateur production of home movies (most adults could shoot video in the late 1980s). As the use of film stock has almost disappeared in professional film production since the release of *Time Indefinite*, the playing field has changed dramatically. These days, the digital medium dominates both the professional and amateur filmmaking markets while scholars debate if the cinematic index or trace survives at all in digital moving images.48

Like *Confessions*, *Time Indefinite* reflects on the absence of a mother. Monica died when Augustine was in his early 30s, and McElwee’s mother succumbed to breast cancer when

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48 See D. N. Rodowick’s *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) for an overview of the central debates.
he was twenty-seven years old. If Book IX of *Confessions* strives to understand how God used Monica for a higher cause (to indoctrinate Augustine into Christianity), *Time Indefinite* questions how film reconstructs the image of McElwee’s mother. Since McElwee’s mother died before the production of *Time Indefinite*, we only catch glimpses of her in 8mm home movie footage shot by Ross’s uncle, Super-8 Nate. Ross never filmed his mother, but Lucille Stafford provides a substitute for her absence. Lucille, a long time McElwee employee and friend, cared for Ross’s mother during her illness. We first see her in *Time Indefinite* in recycled 16mm footage from *Backyard*. Lucille shuffles through boxes and puts shoes once belonging to Ross’s mother in bags. Although Ross does not specifically tell us the shoes belonged to his mother in *Backyard*, he does mention it in *Time Indefinite* through voice-over. Despite the exposition of the later film, McElwee locates how the intimacy of the shot transcends verbal description or explanation:

> My father has given Lucille those shoes to take home. Lucille and I don’t talk as I film. But there is this subtle and poignant awkwardness that occurs because I, and not some camera crew, am filming her. Those are my mother’s shoes. At the same time, Lucille has known me most of my life, and so there is a quiet accustomedness in her attitude towards me. As I film, I am, if not understood, at least accepted. Though none of this is spelled out narratively in this scene, I believe the audience can intuit these things on some level, and it is what makes the scene effective. It’s also an example of what can lend autobiographical filmmaking a particular power.49

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Ross suggests the shot is the closest he ever got to filming his mother. Perhaps the aura of Ross’s mother radiates in the shot of Lucille, much like in the Super-8 footage filmed by Fred during Ross’s baptism. Later, when Ross shoots the fiftieth wedding anniversary of Lucille and her husband Melvin, another instance of the negative emerges. As Lucille and Melvin renew their vows, Ross films the wedding renewal ceremony that did not happen for his parents.

One of the most memorable scenes in *Sherman’s March* depicts Ross’s sister Dee Dee rowing a boat as she offers relationship advice. She suggests to Ross that his camera might help him to approach women. In *Time Indefinite*, Ross returns to film a more somber Dee Dee in Key West, Florida. As her living room opens up to a version of the Garden of Eden, Ross explains his nagging desire to talk about his father’s death. In the South, people do not talk about death, and Ross suggests that deaths (and even lives) sometimes feel like they never happened. Dee Dee tries to talk about her father’s death, but ultimately cannot, on or off camera. Her spoken voice cannot find the words to describe the ineffable, and Ross begins to realize the impossibility of directly representing death in film. He even thinks about interviewing a parrot. However, the film constructs a conception of death just as filming records a representation or sign of lived
experience. Literate voice expresses concepts through writing, while the physical voice exemplifies a different mode of communication altogether.

The scratches and debris on the 8mm footage in *Time Indefinite* display the markings of time. Doane observes, “In the virtual world we negotiate today, information and representations seems to exist nowhere and it could be said that the cultural dream of the digital is a dream of immateriality, without degradation or loss.” While some cinematic forms, like experimental films, often address the materiality of film as their subject, most digital images evoke a seamlessness that transcends degradation. The fact that most people now record the personal moments of their lives on digital video affirms the distinctiveness of the 8mm home movies that survive. The 8mm format itself undergoes resurrection in *Time Indefinite*.

The 8mm footage of Ross’s family resembles a version of what Marianne Hirsch calls *postmemory*. She explains, “Postmemory characterizes that experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generations shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.” Although Hirsch develops postmemory in relation to Holocaust survivors, she does affirm its usefulness to define other second-generation memories. Beyond indicating traumatic events, postmemory transcends recreation and comprehension. Ross refers to the inability to recreate documentary events (reality) when he analyzes footage of his baptism filmed by his uncle Fred. Ross cuts to a slow motion full shot of his mother holding him as a baby. Beyond the significance of his mother’s presence in the shot, McElwee also notices: the way objects

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50 Mary Ann Doane, review of Laura Mulvey’s *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, *Screen* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 118.

shimmer in the light of an ordinary moment, the shadows, the hand-held camera, and the movement/camera shyness of his mother and father—elements quivering with the kind of life that would be difficult to reenact. Does McElwee describe the punctum in motion here? If so, can he see or feel it because he slows down the image of his mother?

The self-consciousness of documentary subjects draws us in. In the baptism footage, we witness this vulnerability in the “shyness mixed with happiness and pride” of Ross’s parents. McElwee also considers how the filmmaker’s presence in a shot affects how and what we see:

The filmmaker’s awareness of the awkwardness of the situation—the hesitations we hear in his off-camera voice, a perceived shifting of the film frame as he grapples with how to be a human being while balancing fourteen pounds of equipment on his shoulder—is also part of the equation. This awkwardness helps raise the edge of the reality tent flap just a bit, enabling a viewer to enter the film, occupy the performance space. In watching authentically filmed footage from “real
life,” there’s always a faint tremor of suspense. This is why “documentary reenactments”—all the rage now on American television—never work for me. The suspense quotient, the incipient nervousness, the aura of newness are absent.  

What distinguishes the aura of newness McElwee describes? Does recycling footage from previous films affect this aura? Marsha and Devin Orgeron remind us that documentary filmmakers perform a kind of secondary editorial role when they merge archival footage with a commercial film—documentarians choose these moments twice: at the moment of filming and the moment of editing.  

Ross complicates this process by recycling footage, shot by both him and his family, throughout his filmography. In a sense, his films reenact the presentation of “real life” twice by reusing material from previous works. If McElwee does detect the punctum in the baptism reel of his mother, could he still identify it if she were still alive? Do we see the gradual process of our own deaths in moving images?  

Later in the film, McElwee incorporates more 8mm footage shot by uncle Fred found in an attic. The attic reel captures Ross’s mother and father shortly after their wedding. Ross notices how young they both appear, and he wishes he could believe his parents have “went home” as Lucille claims her departed brothers have. Nearly forty years have passed since the wedding footage was shot, and Ross meditates on the life that has quickly elapsed. Ross’s parents probably did not find time to view the wedding footage during their life and most likely would not have seen themselves as signifiers of mortality. Most people do not view life and death as a gradual process. Instead, Sobchack suggests our culture associates death with abruptness and

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violence—we best understand death viscerally or personally. Since all cinematic images show the *living process of dying* that we all experience, only sudden death registers as possible and unfair. When Ross’s father dies suddenly in his car, the problem of representing death faces another challenge: how can we represent the abrupt death not captured on film? How does the cinema convey suddenness?

McElwee cannot represent death as pure event in *Time Indefinite*. He also chooses not to visually record the birth of his son. Instead, we only hear the sounds of Adrian’s arrival into the world over an imageless frame. Sound (voice-over) also relays the three primary deaths in the

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54 Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 240. Sobchack identifies the cinematic representation and *durée* of dying as a gradual process as a *third-person death* and the abrupt, violent representation of death as a *first-person death* (i.e. the death that is potentially mine).
film (grandmother, miscarriage, father). However, Ross’s voice-over, written years after the
death of his loved ones, holds temporal and visual distance from death. While two shots of
Ross’s grandmother accompany the news of her passing, McElwee announces Marilyn’s
miscarriage and death of his father over news footage. First, he cuts to an overhead shot of Times
Square in New York (a turn from one year to the next) as he discloses his and Marilyn’s sudden
tragedy. The couple spend New Year’s Eve in the hospital, and Ross calls his father. The film
briefly cuts to black before another news report appears. This time, residents struggle with
pushing cars in the worst blizzard in North Carolina’s recent history. Tragedy then strikes again.
A phone call from Tom brings word that Ross’s father has died. Ross and Marilyn fly to
Charlotte to attend the funeral. Ross expresses his grief in voice-over: he feels like the two
generations before him and the one after never existed. Moreover, the news footage provides visual context for emotional turmoil: helplessness, unpreparedness (it never snows in North Carolina; the blizzard appears suddenly), and cold.

Following the news footage, a shot frames the trees outside of Ross’s bedroom window. The image originates from the winter months when McElwee could not bring himself to film much of anything—a scene he started but never finished. Although the shot appears briefly, it functions as a negative, the pure event of death not captured on film. It evokes a stained glass mural in a cathedral; the shot’s low angle elongates the view of the window and emphasizes its individual panes. Parishioners use symbols or images associated with the Lord to feel close to the ineffable (the effect or illusion of transcendence). Likewise, the window shot seems to signal an unknown presence; it attempts to conjure the ineffable (Nature, God, death, or mortality). Suddenly, ghostly interference disrupts the image for less than one second. Slowing down the film reveals a superimposed image: trees from another point of view captured during the afternoon. A haunting image of a face quickly appears in the left half of the frame, adding to the transcendental effect of the shot. The face almost certainly is McElwee’s reflection in the window, but for a moment, we experience something out of line with the rest of the film. Most importantly, the bedroom window shot anticipates the transition from filming to living life off-camera (the move toward entelechy) that comes full circle when Ross encounters the door-to-door Jehovah’s Witness. The window shot comes from a period when Ross did not feel the compulsion to film. He tried but could not finish.

The sequence where McElwee and Charleen discuss the death of Jim also exemplifies the negative. Ross begins by cutting to archival footage of Jim as he works on the house he and Charleen would live in. The couple lived there for several years until they split up. Charleen
Figure 3-24. *Time Indefinite* – Resurrection. A) The rebuilt house, B) the house reflected in Charleen’s glasses, and C) the photo at the fire station.

stayed, and Jim committed suicide in the house one night while she was out of town. Although Jim burned the house down, it had since been rebuilt exactly as it was. After the fire, Jim becomes physically connected with the house and then reemerges as part of a stranger’s new residence. As Ross and Charleen drive up to the reconstructed house, they both observe, “It’s like it never happened.” The house’s reconstruction parallels the process of filmmaking: bringing the dead back to life in the form of a duplicate, a sign. The new house is not the old house, but it looks exactly like it, much like cinematic representation. The house experiences physical resurrection through its reconstruction. It also undergoes metaphorical resurrection as a framed photo in the office of the local fire department. Charleen sadly explains to Ross, “It was the pinnacle of their life . . . his death.”
Figure 3-25. Charleen. A) Charleen’s backyard in *Time Indefinite*, B) Charleen talks about Jim in *Time Indefinite*, and C) *Sherman’s March* – “This is not art, this is life!”

Following a visit to the fire station, Ross films Charleen’s backyard. He calls the footage he shoots from the deck meaningless, but in the context of the familiar image of the pier, the footage evokes the ineffable. Charleen begins to show what remains of Jim: a photo that invites dreams and his ashes. Many encourage Charleen to bury Jim’s remains, abandon the past, and move on. The two friends then proceed to the creek with Jim’s ashes. Charleen mentions the fish would not eat Jim (a reversal of the death cycle with fish) and that she worries for his safety (after death). Eventually, she decides to take Jim’s ashes home. The scene reiterates something Charleen says to Ross in *Sherman’s March*: “This is not art, this is life!” Art (cinema) reconfigures life into representation or metaphor, a form of writing. Yet something of reality
Figure 3-26. *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) – The final shot.

seems to persist in the moving image. We can sense some part of “real life” as Charleen relives the pain of Jim’s death.

McElwee talks about cornering death with a camera to prevent it from becoming abstract. In a way, *Time Indefinite* gathers proof of death in order to transition from denial to belief. The problem remains of how we represent transcendence on film. Daniel Morgan’s excellent work on Bazin helps us to think about how the negative expresses realism without representing it directly.55 Morgan explains that Bazin’s refusal to define the real opens the stylistic resources of realism—we need to discover what style acknowledges or what it does with the reality of film. The final shot from Robert Bresson’s *Journal d’un Curé de Campagne* (*Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951) illuminates Morgan’s point. Bazin acknowledges the difficulty of showing transcendence on film and claims Bresson turns physical reality into a sign by way of the negative. Morgan explains, “In the moment of the priest’s transcendence (becoming a saint, as it were), Bresson turns *physical reality* itself into a mere sign, suggesting that what is happening is something that cannot be shown; it is spiritual, not of this world.”56 Thus, the dialectic between


56 Ibid., 474.
reality and style matters. How a film conveys its stance toward reality represents an attitude that signifies literate voice. Morgan concludes that realism cannot represent only one thing (a noun), but instead embodies a set of styles (a verb or movement) or a way of interpreting the world. Acknowledgment of reality can manifest in the negative, not just in images associated with real life or documentary.

Morgan draws a distinction between denial and negation. He concludes, “If negation recognizes the physical reality carried by the image, denial simply ignores it.”57 In other words, just because a film such as Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1920) does not visually resemble the physical world in the same way documentary films do, it still can address reality by way of the negative. It can do something with its stance toward reality. This stance (or attitude) relays literate voice in the form of transition (the move toward entelechy). Sobchack reminds us signs of the filmmaker’s situation and stance (quite literally, “attitude”) are, for example, inscribed in and visibly represented by the camera’s stability or movement in relation to the situation that it perceives, in the framing of the object of its vision, in the distance that separates it from the event, in the persistence or reluctance of its gaze in the face of a horrific, chaotic, unjust, or personally dangerous event. As we have already seen, death always forcefully exceeds and subverts its indexical representation—so much so that we can never actually see it.58

Given this, the death in Time Indefinite can never be anything but mediation or writing. The negative (language) turns all moving images, fiction and nonfiction, toward response or attitude.

**Time Indefinite: Hierarchy**

The structure of McElwee’s literate voice also plays a significant role in his attitude or stance toward mortality. Time Indefinite’s hierarchy positions the concept of death in the center of its tautological cycle. The transition from birth to death repeats in the film and also continues

57 Ibid., 479.

58 Sobchack, Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture, 243.
in McElwee’s later work. As the cycle runs its course, the film’s narrative suggests certain concepts as superior to others. For example, the film foregrounds mortality as its “god-term” although it contains several instances of birth. As Ross moves toward entelechy, he orders the events of the film in a particular way. However, the entelechy that the reader identifies may differ from what the author has in mind. Literate voice does not convey intention as meaning, but instead signifies the act of writing.

Burke’s reading of Confessions demonstrates how narrative transforms the motives of Augustine’s autobiography into a temporal sequence. The narrative of Time Indefinite also places McElwee’s dialectical terms (death/life, bachelorhood/fatherhood etc.) in a sequence. The rhetorical function of hierarchy, the ultimate order of terms, communicates a universal purpose to the masses. In McElwee’s autobiography, we do not see an individual ordered by death so much as feel part of a larger process. Ross’s dilemmas echo our own; we all face death, struggle

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with belief in the metaphysical, and experience a series of transitions in life. The film’s hierarchy responds to what it cannot represent (death as pure event) and establishes the literate Self as a form of knowledge. The literate voice arranges the elements of Nature into an order. While McElwee aspires to a perfection that remains beyond his grasp, the film’s hierarchy takes shape through the decisions he makes during his turn toward entelechy.

Just as traditional written forms unfold word by word, autobiographical documentaries unravel shot by shot. McElwee communicates an essence (mortality) not confined to any one shot or edit, but best expressed by the film’s entire structure. No one shot in *Time Indefinite* completely embodies death, and the film’s hierarchy works to incorporate each individual formal element under the “god-term” mortality. In other words, each part of the film extends the concept of death so that it permeates throughout the entire text. For example, the family reunion at the beginning of the film takes on renewed significance when compared to the second reunion at the end. Ross re-turns with a new marriage, a newborn baby, and a renewed perspective on mortality and filmmaking.

The appeal of documentary form stems from its ability to convey a sense of order. McElwee’s films do not look like home movies because their structures reflect years of rewriting. *Time Indefinite* articulates the connection between personality (literate Self) and symbol using (writing). In the film, mortality acts as a form of social order to illustrate the turn from adolescence to adulthood. Burke reminds us that narratives allow for outcomes, for beginnings and endings. The narrative form of *Time Indefinite* supports a cyclical order: reunion → birth (wedding) → death (grandmother, miscarriage, father) → birth/renewal (wedding) → reunion. Like the tautological cycle of Genesis, all of the elements of *Time Indefinite*’s hierarchy imply one another and may be reversed. A similar cycle persists in *Photographic Memory*. While
both *Time Indefinite* and *Photographic Memory* employ philosophical or cyclical styles, they differ slightly in how they relay the events of McElwee’s life. *Time Indefinite* resembles the first nine books of *Confessions* (linear narrative), while *Photographic Memory* adopts the form of the last four books (meditation on memory, time, and digital technology). Just as Augustine cannot say something both narratively and philosophically at the same time, McElwee confronts mortality and resurrection differently in each film. However, both films highlight the philosophical aspects of their respective “god-terms” rather than merely retell what has happened in McElwee’s life.

McElwee mentions that his mother liked to say that everything begins and ends with family. *Time Indefinite* expresses her thought through its narrative structure: it begins and ends with footage of two family reunions one year apart. The first reunion instigates the cycle of life and death: Tom and Sally have just had a child and Ross prepares the announcement of his wedding (initiating the journey toward entelechy). During the first reunion, Ross feels more comfortable filming his family than starting one of his own. However, after the announcement of his engagement, Ross begins his turn toward entelechy, moving from the death of mediated Self/bachelorhood to the birth of a new life of fatherhood and marriage. The two reunions illustrate the unending cycle of life and death that continues throughout McElwee’s filmography.

Ross’s wedding celebrates his impending turn. He plans a new life (a metaphorical birth) and prepares for the arrival of Adrian (a physical birth). Although McElwee continues to film his own life after the events of *Time Indefinite*, his stance or attitude toward filmmaking changes. Ross’s notion of entelechy includes marriage and preparing for fatherhood, but it remains unclear what Marilyn and Adrian’s presence in his life means for his career and literate Self. Can Ross relinquish control of filming to consider how his literate Self changes (or dies) after marriage and
fatherhood? The film charts the development of McElwee’s attitude toward mortality, and 
mortality equals writing at every turn.

The three deaths in McElwee’s life exist at the center of the film’s hierarchy. While Time Indefinite contains several turns, the middle of the film pivots on both physical death and literate death. McElwee’s version of Augustine’s garden conversion takes place during his encounter with the door-to-door Jehovah’s Witness and his daughter. The first half of Time Indefinite includes both representations of literal death (the expiration of physical bodies) and literate death (Ross’s completion of the turn from death to life). However, the path toward one form of entelechy reveals another. The cyclical structure of the film turns again as death provides another kind of resurrection. Ross learns to live with inexplicable loss while trying to negotiate marriage and fatherhood.

After Ross’s transition in the garden, the film repeats the cycle of weddings, announcements, and births. First, Ross accompanies Lucille and Melvin to their fiftieth wedding anniversary. The event gives him the opportunity to document the lives of others, even though Lucille and Melvin resemble an extended family of sorts. Next, Ross lets us know of Adrian’s impending arrival by showing a visibly pregnant Marilyn on the phone. The first footage of Adrian at one week old arrives via the “gerbil shot.” Ross does not shoot much footage from the
first six months of Adrian’s life because he feels a deep connection with his son that does not require documentation. The birth of Adrian brings a new attitude toward filming. MacDonald suggests Adrian’s birth provides an escape from (or an end to?) the “morbid metaphysical feedback loop” that Ross deals with in the film.\textsuperscript{60} Certainly, Adrian signals the end of one cycle and the beginning of another that develops later in \textit{Photographic Memory}. Finally, Ross and his family head back to North Carolina for another family reunion. 

\textit{Time Indefinite} resolves its cyclical order with the second reunion. Ross does not film the later reunion (evidence of his turn), but provides video footage of the event shot by Super-8 Nate’s daughter Mary (another shift between generations). Following the gathering, Ross cuts to a long shot similar to the one that opens the film. This time, a man and woman walk toward the right of the frame as the shadow of McElwee standing on the pier lingers above them. After the shot of the beach, McElwee proceeds to the film’s final image: the “gerbil shot” of Adrian reappears. Ross mentions the possibility of using the shot to begin a future film about Adrian growing up in the world. McElwee’s next feature after \textit{Time Indefinite}, \textit{Six O’Clock News} (1996), does in fact open with the “gerbil shot.” However, \textit{Six O’Clock News} focuses more on

\textsuperscript{60} MacDonald, \textit{American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary}, 219.
the tragedy associated with stories of death and decay on news broadcasts. Ross does not reveal
the details of Adrian’s life until nearly fifteen years later in Photographic Memory.

The final two sections of this chapter address McElwee’s movement from death to life in
more detail. First, I outline his turn toward entelechy. Then, I provide a close analysis of his
meeting with the door-to-door Jehovah’s Witness (his garden conversion). The encounter
explicitly reveals Ross’s attitude, the culmination of his former literate Self in Time Indefinite.
Attitude draws on the poetics of literate voice to reveal how the literate Self turns or transitions.
Like Augustine’s experience in the garden, McElwee’s attitude takes shape through an event
where movement occurs.

**Time Indefinite: Entelechy**

Like all filmmakers, McElwee aspires to perfection. However, one question remains: how
do Ross’s actions resonate as symbolic pursuit? All rhetorics strive toward the notion of
entelechy. The rhetoric of religion persuades Augustine to convert in the garden, and Burke reads
the literate voice of his Confessions as a series of movements (turns). If Burke conceives of God
as the ultimate entelechy, “god-terms” name the drive toward entelechy. Burke describes
entelechy as behavior (writing) rather than essence. For McElwee, the motion of Time Indefinite
pivots on the concept of mortality, and what can be said about death also may be said about the
general function of documentary filmmaking. Mortality contains all the motivations and ideas
implicit in McElwee’s literate voice. A logology of the moving image reveals these motivations
and outlines how cinematography, mise-en-scène, and editing work structurally.

McElwee’s entelechy centers on Marilyn for most of Time Indefinite. Marilyn first
appears briefly alongside Ross in video footage shot by Ann; they stand in a group of people
captured in a long shot. However, the first one-shot of Marilyn arrives via Ross’s camera. He
introduces her only as his filmmaking partner in voice-over, perhaps to heighten the effect of
their impending engagement news. After the engagement announcement, Ross’s camera battery dies. Ann steps in with her home video camera and asks Marilyn how her stepson began the road to marriage. The video footage of Ann interviewing Marilyn appears on a monitor or television—visible flicker affects the image. Ross emphasizes the importance of documenting the moments of his life, but his marriage will change how he views his filmmaking. Before Marilyn, Ross never had any trouble filming life as it went on around him.

Marilyn signifies the promise of love and happiness that seems to evade Ross before the production of *Time Indefinite*. McElwee’s turn indicates movement from one chapter of his life to another, and his film works to both document and perform the movement. The difference between literate document and physical reality recalls the distinction between the literate Self and the physical Self. Ross attempts to move away from writing in an effort to distance his physical Self from his literate Self. Perhaps this need for distance stems from the commercial and critical success of *Sherman’s March*. Ross’s literate Self garnered widespread viewership in *Sherman’s March*, and success often leads to confusion about how writing affects the physical Self. Is Ross’s literate Self the same entity as his physical Self? Do certain versions of Ross only exist on camera? Can marriage and fatherhood satisfy the desire filmmaking has fulfilled? McElwee must turn away from the mediation of experience and toward the entelechy of the
Figure 3-31. *Time Indefinite* – Ricky Leacock.

physical world (pure experience). Film is a perverse imitation of the physical world. Just as Augustine turns from the perversion of his mistresses, McElwee must turn from the perversity of mediation toward a more authentic Self made of flesh and blood.

When Ross visits Ricky Leacock for a dinner party, he finds a man who has strived for entelechy and failed. Leacock’s Self is intertwined with his filmmaking career—he is among the most well-known and influential documentarians in film history. When Ross arrives at his apartment, he learns of Leacock’s relationship problems. Leacock’s girlfriend Sarah has decided not to join the group for dinner. A forty-year age difference exists between Sarah and Leacock, and Ricky ponders how their relationship can withstand this gap. Leacock was married twice in his life (at the time of filming), and he speaks of his reluctance to get married again. Part of his resistance comes from his “roving eye,” or his enjoyment of flirting. Although Leacock would later find happiness with his partner and collaborator Valérie Lalonde, his appearance in *Time Indefinite* offers a vision of the man McElwee might become: a filmmaker full of unfulfilled desire. Leacock resembles a man who has followed a different path toward entelechy, one that offers a skeptical view of marriage and love.

McElwee explains that filming offers a detached perspective on life, but meeting Marilyn changes his attachment to filming. Detachment does not seem interesting to Ross after falling in
love, and he demonstrates the entelechy of small everyday moments through footage of a trip to Mexico. At first, Ross films Marilyn as a celebration of his love for her. He films her drinking bad coffee in a cheap hotel and notes how he loves the expression on her face. He loves the intense way that she brushes her teeth. Although Marilyn never has a problem with Ross’s filming, he begins to have the “this is not art, this is life!” problem upon his return from Mexico. Although Ross still feels the compulsion to film his life, he begins to experience a stronger desire to exist beyond his literate Self after meeting Marilyn.

After falling in love with Marilyn, Ross begins to consider having a child. However, he initially has doubts about being a father. Ross’s hesitation to have kids relates to several moments in his and Marilyn’s life: the death of Ross’s younger brother at age eleven and the
death of Marilyn’s sister at a young age. In addition, Ross suggests having a child would not make filmmaking any easier. He continues to talk about children in relationship to death over images from Mexico. Ross films a cemetery that seems to contain mostly graves of children. To his surprise, he shoots six out of thirty rolls of film on the cemetery. He jokes that perhaps his attention to the graves means he thinks about death 20 percent of the time. Once again, filming indicates mortality in *Time Indefinite*. Conversely, McElwee’s turn toward entelechy involves the association of children with *life*, a connection made possible after Marilyn’s tragic miscarriage and the encounter with the Jehovah’s Witness.

Ross eventually moves in with Marilyn. He films her apartment and provides a room-by-room visual tour. The clutter and confined space of the apartment prompts Ross to admit that a
baby could not live there comfortably. He wonders what would happen to the routine of his filmmaking career if a child entered the picture. Ross’s anxiety about getting married and having a baby worsens when his friends (including Cambridge area documentarians Robb Moss and Steven Ascher) take him to a bar the night before his wedding. They tell Ross that he will not recall his wedding, but the documentation of the event will help him remember. Several of Ross’s friends also talk of divorce. The filmmakers seem skeptical of the institution of marriage (echoing Leacock’s earlier remarks). Perhaps the literate Self holds more appeal for them than commitment to a physical life unconsumed with filming.
Ross continues to film just hours before his wedding ceremony. Despite Marilyn’s apprehension, Ross cannot help but record everything at the wedding: the caterers entering the kitchen, an intimate moment between Marilyn and her parents, and a baby on the porch. Ross finally negotiates a final ten minutes of filming with Marilyn and shoots her brushing her hair in a vanity mirror. As the ceremony draws nearer, Ross must relinquish control of his camera to Moss and Ascher. During the ceremony, Ross gives Marilyn his right hand instead of his left to receive his ring. The mix-up shows Ross having trouble functioning without his camera. As everyone laughs at Ross’s embarrassment, the officiator begins to recite verse six from the eighth chapter of the Song of Solomon: “Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm; for love is strong as death.” The moment suggests Ross’s turn from the cynicism associated with filming (mediation) toward love (Marilyn). The officiator follows with verse seven: “Many waters cannot quench love; neither can the floods drown it.” In this verse, water stands in opposition of love and recalls the association between death and water throughout the film.

Following their wedding, Ross and Marilyn prepare to have a baby. Although the miscarriage delays their plans, Adrian soon enters the world. A medium shot of a naked, pregnant Marilyn precedes the audible documentation of Adrian’s birth. MacDonald suggests
that the shot recalls the image of Jane from Brakhage’s *Window Water Baby Moving*. While Brakhage’s film shows the graphic process of birth, *Time Indefinite* omits visible evidence of Adrian’s arrival. MacDonald sees McElwee’s presentation of birth as a response to Brakhage’s film. McElwee decides to participate directly in Adrian’s birth, and his decision to tape-record it rather than film it allows him to do so. Moreover, the decision not to film the birth signifies the completion of the turn. While Ross has no problem filming his wedding (pre-turn), his turn toward entelechy alleviates the compulsion to film after his conversion. He not only chooses to not film the birth of Adrian, but he also leaves the documentation of the second reunion to his cousin Mary. The birth not recorded and the reunion filmed by someone else completes the cycle of McElwee’s transformation.

**Time Indefinite: Attitude**

The Self retains two sources of reference for identity: the physical body and the capacity for language. Attitude exists somewhere between physical, sensual experience and writing (symbol making). In other words, attitude incorporates both language and biology—it functions as a point of personal mediation between the realms of nonsymbolic motion and symbolic action.

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61 Ibid., 217-219.
Given this, the voice we think we hear or see in autobiographical documentaries exists as attitude. Autobiographical documentaries structure the elements of Nature and convey the personal mediation between action and motion as literate voice. Attitude reveals motives as modes of inquiry, not meaning. Literate voice constructs an attitude or stance directed by a text’s summarizing concept or “god-term.” This stance or turn relays a text’s dialectic, its negative, its hierarchy, and its entelechy together as a transitional event, gesture, or image. In *Time Indefinite*, McElwee’s attitude emerges during his encounter with the door-to-door Jehovah’s Witness and his daughter.

Burke did not read J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* until the mid-1970s. After finally reading it, he published a review of Austin’s book in 1975. In the review, Burke compares Austin’s ideas with his own. Burke equates attitude with Austin’s illocutionary act, a performative utterance dependent on the social conventions of language. Illocution marks the intention of the speech act; it signifies the motivation of the act within a specific language game. However, Burke points out that when someone pronounces attitude, *how* he or she does so will not guarantee the attitude will be shared or understood by others. A specific perlocutionary effect will not always result from a speaker’s intention. Individual response relies on nonsymbolic motion *and* symbolic action. A person’s body may behave in one way (signaling one attitude) while their linguistic utterance communicates something else entirely. For example, the mother who laughs while sarcastically telling her unruly son that she is going to kill him differs from another instance where the same mother physically ends her son’s life after uttering the words: “I’m going to kill you.” In addition, despite what an attitude symbolizes, it always relies on the realm of motion for activation. For Burke, nonsymbolic motion includes the neural motions of

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the body (brain waves) or the physical act of writing or speaking. Thus, attitude integrates both
the movement of language and Nature simultaneously.

Autobiographical documentary possesses the unique ability to represent nonsymbolic
motion and symbolic action concurrently. Although the movement before the camera may not be
the same movement on the screen, the literate voice of moving images originates in the realm of
Nature. Raw footage expresses literate voice when structured in a particular way. In short,
literate voice signals an attitude toward reality; it attempts to duplicate the experience of the
physical Self through stylization (language). Morgan locates the connection between reality and

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Debra Hawhee, *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language* (Columbia: University of
South Carolina Press, 2009), 159.
the stance taken toward it as a process rather than a form of static meaning. He provides an example of Katherine (Ingrid Bergman) in Roberto Rossellini’s *Viaggio in Italia* (*Journey to Italy*, 1954) to illustrate his idea. When Katherine encounters the statues at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Rossellini’s camera does not so much replicate Katherine’s point of view as express her relationship to the works of art:

There is a shot of Katherine walking directly at the camera, looking intently in front of her. A 180-degree cut leads to a quick track towards a statue of a discus thrower, staring above the camera into the distance; the camera stops slightly beneath the statue, looking up at it. The shot/reverse-shot pairing generates a degree of intensity, almost suggesting that the statue looks back at her—or that it has, for Katherine at least, the capacity to do so. The power of these two shots then fades away as the next shot shows a longer view of her beside the statue as she starts to move away to the right; its magic (its aura?) is lost as her encounter with it comes to an end. Rossellini’s camera registers the changing facts of the situation, not just by showing it but by articulating a series of views that brings out these facts.  

Morgan proposes that after Katherine’s encounter with the statue of the discus thrower, three subsequent shots of busts have a connection to her gaze, even though we do not see her looking at them. The camera’s movement tells us how she responds to the statues; we see something internal to her. In other words, Katherine’s attitude (her turn) manifests in how Rossellini’s camera reacts to the physical reality of the statues. Morgan concludes that even in a single shot, both the physical world (index) and an attitude (interpretation or stylization of Nature) emerges. Rather than use the term *attitude*, Morgan prefers Stanley Cavell’s *acknowledgment*: a process that generates the relation between style and reality.  

Cavell’s acknowledgement bears similarities to Burke’s attitude (and my use of it here). Both attempt to generate social and philosophical forms of knowledge from the realm of Nature (i.e. nonsymbolic motion, reality,

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64 Morgan, 466.

65 Stanley Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 238-266.
Morgan’s essay provides a useful way to think about how films construct an attitude toward reality in narrative fiction.

Following the death of his father, Ross returns to North Carolina to spend some time alone. Life has continued in his father’s absence. Lucille and Melvin take care of the house and a piano tuner shows up to tune the family piano. Then, someone else appears at Ross’s door: a well-dressed, middle-aged black Jehovah’s Witness and his young daughter. The Jehovah’s Witness begins to talk to Ross about Chapter Twenty-Four of the Book of Matthew. The Gospel of Matthew serves as a transition (turn) between the Old and New Testaments. In the chapter, Jesus describes the future destruction of a temple, the center of worship and religious instruction. Jesus’s words prompt his disciples to ask him about the end of the age, to which he describes war between nations, famines, and earthquakes. Jesus tells his disciples the end of the age will bring about their persecution, and many will turn away from faith.

As the Jehovah’s Witness continues to speak, McElwee begins to comment on their conversation in voice-over. As Ross talks, his mind begins to wander and he turns to capture the Jehovah’s Witness’s young daughter in a medium close-up. Ross describes feeling paralyzed or hypnotized and recalls the effect that Witnesses have on him. No matter where he travels, they seem to find him. Despite providing comic relief, McElwee’s voice-over (symbolic action) also
competes for dominant position with what we see in the scene (nonsymbolic motion). Action and motion run parallel to exhibit both the “now” of filming and “future” voice-over reflection at the same time. McElwee’s description of how the realm of Nature affects his concentration represents the scene’s most significant element. Ross is trying to film his life (as usual), but something interrupts the process.

Neither the rhetoric of religion (the Word) nor the action of filming (the word) instigate McElwee’s turn. Instead, Ross is converted by the ineffable: unplanned elements of Nature (reality, the physical world) captured or represented on film, but only experienced by the physical Self. These details, including the sweetness of the daughter’s face and the beauty of light on the face of the Jehovah’s Witness, remind Ross of the life of children (Adrian) and the entelechy beyond the literate Self (a new kingdom). They represent the kinds of moments that would prove impossible to recreate, like the baptism footage of Ross’s mother. In a sense, what Ross experiences during his conversation with the Jehovah’s Witness cannot be expressed by his literate voice. Only years later, in voice-over, does Ross attempt to express what he feels during the encounter. His turn produces a realization: the ineffable experiences of the physical Self cannot find their duplicate through literate voice. Such elements exist beyond the realm of symbolic action; duplication cannot convey their essence.
The title of *Time Indefinite* comes from Chapter Two of the Book of Daniel. Daniel interprets King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and speaks of a kingdom of God that will stand to time indefinite (forever). The Jehovah’s Witness reads the verse and tells Ross about a shift (turn) soon underway, where the kingdom of God will supersede the physical world. Those who embrace the Word will live on spiritually forever just as those captured on film (the word) also live on in time indefinite. In both instances, the experiences of the physical Self must yield so that literate voice or the Word of a supernatural being may persist. Ross’s conversion is decided for him: neither the Word nor the word will provide entelechy. Ross desires the experiences of the physical Self not reducible to symbolic action: love and birth (Marilyn and Adrian) as pure event.

McElwee’s attitude (stance) on mortality (filmmaking) exists somewhere between action and motion. First, Ross experiences the sensation of a moment while filming. He then returns to the moment years later and attempts to explain his sensation via literate voice (voice-over). When he cannot, his turn occurs. The physical Self must witness the ineffable; others cannot experience it through writing. Ross expresses his disinterest in what the Jehovah’s Witness tells him. His attention then turns towards the sweetness of the daughter and the beauty of the light as
Figure 3-43. *Time Indefinite* – Ross follows the sound of an airplane toward the sky. It plays across the Jehovah’s Witness’s face. McElwee tries to use the camera to preserve his experience. He hopes “has the exposure set correctly so [he] can at least come close to capturing the light as [he] sees it.” Once again, he tries to embalm the experience of the physical Self in cinema’s time indefinite. However, in this moment, Ross accepts the finite nature of the physical Self and commits to savoring the moments of its experience. These moments live and die in Nature, and reliving them through the literate Self will not satisfy unhappiness, stop pollution, or cease nuclear warfare. Ross’s attitude toward reality turns from the perversion (parody) of filmmaking toward the entelechy of physical experience.

The Jehovah’s Witness offers faith and hope as possible means to satisfy the desire of humans until the return of the Lord. Here, the Witness suggests the personal experience of the ineffable as salvation over the Word itself. The Bible does not generate belief on its own, we do.

As the Jehovah’s Witness continues to speak, an airplane begins to fly overhead. Ross keeps filming before letting his guest know that he can no longer hear him, physically or metaphorically. The conversion has taken place and McElwee can no longer hear the Word as a possible means of salvation. Ross enjoys the moment as his camera captures a brightly lit sky.
McElwee followed *Time Indefinite* with *Six O'Clock News*, a semi-personal documentary that aired on the PBS series *Frontline* in early 1997. The film opens with the “gerbil shot” of Adrian. However, it is not the documentary about Adrian’s growing up hinted at in *Time Indefinite*. Instead, the film primarily relays the personal tragedies of people McElwee sees on television news broadcasts. Nevertheless, *Six O’Clock News* does incorporate a few autobiographical elements: Adrian and Marilyn make brief appearances, Ross reflects on how having a family has changed his life, and several of the personal, metaphysical questions raised in *Time Indefinite* reemerge. In fact, McElwee once explained that *Six O’Clock News* was originally conceived as part of *Time Indefinite*:

> Oh, it's scary territory. I'm backing off from it, having done *Six O'Clock News*, going out to the outside world and devoting myself to looking at other people's lives. But it helps maybe to understand that *Six O'Clock News* was conceived as one film along with *Time Indefinite*, originally. And the idea was that the filmmaker protagonist, this character that I've created, underwent a number of personal tragedies: death of father, miscarriage, death of his grandmother, all within a very short length of time. In that part of this film he dealt with his own reactions to personal tragedy. And in part 2 he would go out with his camera and investigate how other people had dealt with personal tragedy. And what happened was, as I was working on this extremely long film, I realized that it was becoming very unwieldy and that few people would probably sit through a four-hour movie dealing with a tragedy. And at that point I decided to divide it in half. I think of one as being a response to the other, in a way, in that they are connected. And in fact the last shot in *Time Indefinite* is the first shot of *Six O'Clock News*, so they're linked in a very overt way.¹

Although both documentaries address personal tragedy, *Six O’Clock News* draws clearer boundaries between the documentation of Self and Other than its predecessor. In the film,

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McElwee associates autobiography (Self) with images of home (Boston/North Carolina), domesticity (Adrian and Marilyn), and interior space, while the external “real world” exemplifies the tragic lives of strangers on news broadcasts. This external world signifies danger and fear for McElwee, and he begins to consider the well-being of his family more carefully after watching the news stories.

Eventually, McElwee decides to document the lives of people connected to the world he sees on television. He cuts to footage of Hurricane Hugo as it ravages South Carolina. Ross’s close friend Charleen had recently relocated to a new home on Sullivan’s Island following the death of Jim and the loss of their former home. Fearing for Charleen’s safety, McElwee travels to the Charleston area to find her. Ross starts to think more about the safety of his family after Hugo demonstrates how nature can disturb the sanctuary of home and daily routine. McElwee then travels from the Bible Belt (e.g. Mississippi, Arkansas) all the way to southern California. Along the way, he encounters a landlord obsessed with television, a successful Korean businessman who has lost his wife in a murder/robbery, an Arizona couple who reside in a trailer park, and a Hollywood producer who expresses interest in McElwee directing a narrative fiction film based on his own life. Most of the encounters seem removed from the metaphysical focus of *Time Indefinite* until Ross stumbles upon a news story about an immigrant from El Salvador named Salvador Peña.

McElwee’s conversations with Salvador Peña break the chain of erratic interviews in *Six O’Clock News* and turn the film toward the metaphysical questions raised in *Time Indefinite*. Peña is a religious man who survives a collapsed parking garage accident caused by a 6.6 earthquake in Los Angeles. His miraculous survival provokes inquiry into the nature of belief. Despite the hardships in his life, Peña continues to believe in the will of God and views his
accident as a test of faith. Ross wonders how God could allow tragedy to befall such a devoted man. He soon follows Peña to a church and once again finds himself shooting religious imagery. McElwee admits in voice-over that he may have some latent desire to capture the presence of God on film. In the church, Ross notices a woman across the aisle starring intensely at a statue of Saint Anthony of Padua. The woman does not pay attention to McElwee’s camera as she whispers prayers to the statue. Ross asks, “What exactly is she seeing? Where’s she gone?” The moment exudes a calmness that recalls the meta-image of the pier in *Time Indefinite*. It should not surprise viewers of *Six O’Clock News* that the familiar image of the pier persists in the film’s
mise-en-scène. Although McElwee focuses on the personal tragedies of others, he returns to the visual patterns and metaphysical concerns of his literate Self.

Nearly seven years passed after the release of Six O’Clock News before McElwee finished another feature length documentary. His next film, Bright Leaves, premiered at the 2003 Cannes Film Festival in the Directors’ Fortnight program. The film strays further away from the autobiographical focus of McElwee’s earlier work. For example, Marilyn appears in Bright Leaves for less than ten seconds, and we begin to assume that she no longer wishes to appear on camera. However, Bright Leaves does not break completely from the realm of autobiography. It documents McElwee’s quest to find out if the 1950 Michael Curtiz film Bright Leaf is based on the life of his great-grandfather, John Harvey McElwee. Bright Leaf tells the story of tobacco baron Brant Royle (Gary Cooper) and his struggle against rival Major Singleton (Donald Crisp). McElwee seeks to uncover if the Warner Bros. film took its inspiration from the real life conflict between his great-grandfather and the Duke family of Durham, North Carolina. His journey leads to retelling the history of the North Carolina tobacco industry and interviewing people affected by tobacco related illness.

Although Adrian only appears briefly in Bright Leaves, the film does include two short sequences of McElwee’s son that recall the cycle began in Time Indefinite. The first of these lasts about four minutes and frames Adrian alongside Ross’s voice-over reflection on time and memory. The sequence begins with a return to the North Carolina pier of Ross’s childhood. He brings Adrian to the pier as his family returns south for the annual reunion. The image of father

2 MacDonald observes, “The movement away from a focus on family in Six O’Clock News and even more fully in Bright Leaves suggests, at least to me, that after Time Indefinite and the birth of Adrian McElwee, either McElwee himself or Marilyn Levine began to feel uncomfortable with his filming within the family circle and that this resulted in McElwee’s decision to separate his filming from his home life.” (American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary, 228).
and son on top of the pier in *Time Indefinite* finds its inverse in the footage of Adrian’s return to the pier; Ross films his son catching fish *underneath* it. As the sequence continues, McElwee cuts to more images that recall *Time Indefinite*. The “wall of babies” has now become a “wall of toddlers and adolescents,” and Ross later brings a pre-teen Adrian to run sound for him while he films a woman recovering in a hospital from a smoking related illness (another “death” bed).

McElwee mentions that he finds himself returning to North Carolina less as the years go by. He cuts to archival films of Adrian feeling more at home in New England—images of a toddler-aged Adrian sledding and chasing pigeons precedes footage of McElwee’s son as a skateboarding pre-teen. These shots provide McElwee with visual support for voice-over reflection. Ross laments how the process of filming has failed to slow time down and delay Adrian’s transition into
adulthood. He explains that the older Adrian gets, the less time he spends with his father. This distance increases as Adrian approaches adulthood and later takes cinematic form in
*Photographic Memory.*

One of the most fascinating moments in *Bright Leaves* arrives when McElwee considers if the 1950 film *Bright Leaf* functions as “a home movie nestled inside a Hollywood production.” He asks, “Can narrative fiction can reveal documentary moments? Does reality come through in certain performative gestures in Hollywood productions?” One moment in *Bright Leaf* interests McElwee most: Royle embraces and kisses Margaret Singleton (Patricia Neal), the daughter of his rival, the Major. Behind the scenes, Cooper and Neal carried on a love affair for years, despite Cooper being married. As Royle/Cooper kisses Margaret/Neal, her left hand reaches up towards him and then abruptly retracts. McElwee wonders if this gesture somehow indicates a
merging of Neal’s private life with the role of Margaret. Ross’s inquiry also raises questions about how much (if any) of his own life his camera reveals. McElwee begins to realize that mediation (memory) can never fully embody lived experience (time).

The conclusion of *Bright Leaves* paves the way for the more complex meditation on time and memory in *Photographic Memory*, the film about Adrian’s growing up in the world. A thirty-second sequence of Adrian returning a fish to the safety of the ocean closes *Bright Leaves*. Rather than watch the creature suffocate, Adrian assures the fish lives. The young McElwee provides a kind of physical and metaphorical *resurrection* through the fish, a renewal of physical
life as profilmic event and a representational reversal of the death of fish in *Time Indefinite* (mortality turns into resurrection). The final image of Adrian facing the ocean also connects water with life rather than death (e.g. Adrian as child, the prevention of the demise of the fish). The turn toward life or *resurrection* fully embodies McElwee’s literate voice in *Photographic Memory*, a film that finds the director less interested in trying to preserve time (lived experience) through memory (filming). Instead, Ross desires to resurrect the flesh and blood experiences captured by his photographic and cinematic cameras over the years. *Photographic Memory* is a film about trying to relive the experiences of the physical Self by resurrecting the memories written by literate media.

*Photographic Memory: Reimagining Entelechy*

Prior to the release of *Photographic Memory*, McElwee completed a feature-length work that did not receive distribution after its 2008 premiere at the Venice Film Festival. The film in question, *In Paraguay*, documents the adoption of McElwee’s youngest child, Mariah, in 1995. Ross, Marilyn, and Adrian travel to Asunción to retrieve their new family member, only to meet resistance from the Paraguayan court system. Although *In Paraguay* depicts happier times for the McElwee family, the entelechy Ross strives toward in *Time Indefinite* had begun to break down by the late 2000s. The completion of *In Paraguay* coincided with a period of turmoil for Ross—he and Marilyn had agreed to divorce. Although Marilyn consented to *In Paraguay*’s Venice premiere, she decided against its widespread distribution and Ross obliged. Not many people have seen the film, including McElwee’s daughter Mariah.

McElwee admits he has not been able to bring himself to view *Time Indefinite* since his divorce. Following the split, Ross found the entelechy of marriage and family transformed. He

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3 Due to its unavailability, I have not viewed *In Paraguay*. My summary of the film relies on MacDonald’s analysis in *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary*, 228-231.
began to wonder how the meanings of autobiographical texts change once a viewer or reader understands the aftermath of personal events. *Time Indefinite* certainly expresses a different type of mortality in light of this kind of knowledge. The question of how meanings shift in autobiography invites another historical question: how does lived experience affect the negotiation of writing years later? Understandably, McElwee appeared pessimistic in a recent interview while talking about revisiting *Time Indefinite* in the future:

But if I were to watch it now, it would be a completely different film—as different as if it had been re-shot, re-edited, and given a different voice-over. *Time Indefinite* was made by another Ross living a different life. Like an anthropological film made about a tribe that no longer exists, *Time Indefinite*, at least in terms of my marriage, is an ethnography of extinct emotions.4

McElwee explains that his divorce partially severed the continuity of his autobiography. He adds, “In my worst moments, the family scenes in my films now seem like fictions, a kind of lying. Perhaps there never was any real truth behind the scenes, in the sentiments of my films.”5

McElwee’s words reinforce the ephemeral nature of autobiographical documentary; there is nothing truthful or infinite about the process of writing or time—it cannot signify absolute meaning.

In *Photographic Memory*, McElwee’s literate voice enters a new chapter; he records the strained relationship between himself and Adrian. Although not addressed in the film, he also endures the demise of his relationship with Marilyn. Ross’s concern for the misdirection of Adrian’s life soon prompts him to look into his own past. At Adrian’s age, Ross also experienced a lack of direction about his future. In his twenties, McElwee spent months in Brittany, France working as a photographer’s assistant in the village of Saint-Quay-Portrieux. *Photographic

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5 Ibid., 160.
Memory mostly documents the month of September 2010 when McElwee returns to Saint-Quay in search of Maurice and Maud, two mysterious figures from his past. We first glimpse Maurice and Maud in photographs—the idealized signifiers of memories from Ross’s early adulthood. *Photographic Memory* is the record of McElwee’s desire to resurrect these memories into physical experience.

The version of McElwee in *Photographic Memory* resembles an older version of the pre-marriage Ross in some ways. The act of filming provides sanctuary from the pain of personal turmoil, much like shooting footage helped McElwee cope with death in *Time Indefinite* or search for potential love in *Sherman’s March*. Ross exhibits an awareness of his own mortality in *Photographic Memory*:

Also, I should say that a year after finishing *Photographic Memory*, I can see that it’s a somewhat “grouchy” film—a little impatient, a little melancholy—and not only because of thoughts of mortality. Though Marilyn and I were still married, our marriage was on the rocks, and we both knew it. Also, I had just had major surgery for removal of a brain tumor. All in all, 2010 was a very bad year for me—though I will also say that making the film provided a refuge, a way to escape into something I loved doing, as well as to escape into the much happier past of my time in Brittany—a double-escape.6

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Obviously, one cannot help connecting the Ross of *Photographic Memory* to his father, the late Dr. McElwee. The unmarried, fatherless Ross McElwee of earlier films evolves into a disapproving father concerned with the influence of technology on his son’s commitment to career and family.

While in Saint-Quay in the 1970s, Ross worked for Maurice, a wedding photographer he met in a café. Ross stays with Maurice and his wife while learning the art of photography. Eventually, Maurice introduces Ross to his young friend Maud in a café. Ross and Maud become lovers and spend the summer working in open-air markets and eating oysters. For a reason he cannot recall, Ross leaves Maud for the south of France. When he returns to Saint-Quay a month later, she has moved away. One day, Maurice suddenly fires Ross, accusing him of losing negatives. McElwee cannot remember his termination clearly, and he begins to wonder if it actually happened. The return to Saint-Quay offers Ross the potential for answers—for figuring out what happened to Maurice or Maud and learning how to resurrect his relationship with Adrian. McElwee’s return to France also provides some distance from Adrian’s problems with drugs, alcohol, and lack of academic interest. However, the return equally affords McElwee a chance for resurrection—if he can find Maurice or Maud (resurrecting or re-living memory as physical experience), he might save Adrian (resurrecting the idealized younger Adrian found in 16mm cinematic memories). Of course, McElwee cannot physically resurrect the younger version of his son, but perhaps he can repair his relationship with Adrian and return to happier times.

McElwee strives toward a new ideal or entelechy in *Photographic Memory*. He seeks to relive the moments captured by his literate Self (memory) in the present (time). As McElwee’s literate voice develops over time, it continues to turn toward idealized love. More specifically,
McElwee seeks to resurrect the idealized love he achieved during the period recorded in *Time Indefinite*. *Photographic Memory* offers *resurrection* as its “god-term,” signifying the turn from memory to time. The film also signifies another turn, one that concerns the apparatus shift from literacy to electracy. *Photographic Memory* (implicitly) asks: can literate modes of writing (16mm and 35mm filmmaking, journals, analog photography) resurrect the idealized love of the past in the digital age? How does the experience of time and memory change in electracy? Does literate voice persist in digital networks, or does the concept of voice resemble something else entirely?

Just as Augustine’s journey did not end with his baptism by Ambrose in Milan or with the death of Monica in Ostia (where the narrative of *Confessions* ends), McElwee too continues to struggle after his conversion. *Photographic Memory* foregoes the security of family life as Ross fears becoming a filmmaker consumed with unfulfilled desire (like Ricky Leacock in *Time Indefinite*). Rather than providing a chronological narrative of one year as *Time Indefinite* does, *Photographic Memory* offers a meditation on the nature of memory, time, and digital technology. Given this, McElwee’s autobiography continues to mirror the structure of Augustine’s *Confessions*. The first nine books (Books I-IX) of Augustine’s autobiography provide a personal narrative account of events, while the last four books (Books X-XIII) analyze the principles of memory (what Burke calls a turn from time to eternity). The turn from *Time Indefinite* (mortality) to *Photographic Memory* (resurrection) provides a similar movement. In the latter film, McElwee cuts back and forth between the idealized memories of Adrian and Saint-Quay, analyzing how the past enables reflection on the present. *Photographic Memory* does not present a linear account of events so much as it considers resurrection through memory, of time, and despite digital technology.
Burke explains that Augustine’s internal consistency reveals itself through the “god-term” of his Confessions, even when no explicit mention of the divine being or quotation of scripture exists.\(^7\) God persists in the form of Augustine’s language regardless if his use of theological terminology makes his “god-term” obvious from the start. Similarly, resurrection names McElwee’s logic of internal consistency—patterns in cinematography, mise-en-scène, and editing repeatedly reimagine, relive, and represent the principles of memory. However, memory is not a place in time. McElwee desires to challenge mortality (memories represented through aging literate media) and resurrect memory as a place in the realm of Nature. If Augustine clings to his entelechy (God), McElwee also clings to his renewed entelechy: the resurrection of memories as experience in the realm of Nature.

**Photographic Memory: Memory**

In Book X of Confessions, Augustine explains why he confesses to his reader—he wishes others to change their lives by his example. Augustine aspires to transcend the physical Self for knowledge of God. If the human soul orders the sense perceptions of Nature, Augustine must ascend to the realm of memory because it stores (among other things) emotions and knowledge of concepts. He asks how God (a concept) exists in memory, and yet, transcends both sense perception and pure emotion. How can one have knowledge of God? Augustine seems to suggest that knowing the Self leads to knowledge of the divine because spirit embodies (at least partly) the divinity of God. While memory stores sense perceptions, abstract concepts (such as mathematics), and emotions, it more importantly contains the impression of absolute happiness found in God. The pure happiness Augustine refers to reminds us of the entelechy of literate voice. However, humans cannot realize such perfection solely in the realm of Nature. Just as the

human memory contains Augustine’s notion of perfection (God), *Photographic Memory* encompasses the impression of McElwee’s entelechy, *resurrection* ("god-term"). Given this, film (or digital video) functions as a simulation of memory—the process of filming and editing recollects and reorganizes idealized recorded images much like the human memory orders the subjective perceptions of Nature.  

After recalling the memories of his life in the first nine books of *Confessions*, Augustine turns his attention to the principals of memory and time in Books X-XIII. Burke identifies this turn from the *narrative* of memories to the *principles* of memories as the logological equivalent of the turn from time to eternity. A similar movement exists between *Time Indefinite* and *Photographic Memory*. Burke later identifies the particulars of memory and how they promote discriminations in the latter four books of *Confessions*. For example, we can distinguish the scent of lilies from that of violets while smelling nothing. Therefore, preferences can exist solely in memory. Burke concludes that some forms of knowledge do not originate in Nature. Instead, these conceptual forms of knowledge derive from symbolic action. Writing reflects the discriminations and preferences of literate voice, and the selection of images always represents the entelechy of recalled moments from time.

What does it mean to remember memory itself, or to remember forgetfulness as Augustine does in Book X? This reflexive stage, or the “privation of memory” as Burke calls it, suggests Augustine’s equation of God with a happy life; his memory allows him to recall having found the truth in the garden. All human beings seek happiness and possess at least a partial

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8 Much has been written on the relationship between cinema and memory. For a useful overview of the major debates, see Isabelle McNeill’s *Memory and the Moving Image: French Film in the Digital Era* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 19-50. Also see Mulvey, 9.


10 Ibid., 127.
memory of joy. Thus, according to Burke, if happiness equals God (the most perfect entelechy), then God resides in the memory. I suggest the absolute happiness or entelechy of literate voice equals God (or more specifically a “god-term”). *Photographic Memory* does not represent the totality of McElwee’s physical (or even photographic) memory, such a task is impossible. Instead, the film charts Ross’s path toward entelechy, and what we see reflects the turn from mortality to resurrection.

In the latter part of Book X, Augustine writes about the turn from memory to temptation and the role images play in recall and imagination. He explains that his lust for women still haunts him as erotic dreams (Burke points out that Augustine’s dreams have not been converted). Like dreams, moving images recall past events and provide stimuli for the idealization of future moments in time. If God saves Augustine (and all humans) from the temptations of the senses, curiosity, and power, the “god-terms” that inform the literate voice of autobiography anchor (“save”) entelechy and prevent its turn away from the ideal. In other words, God (or concepts) averts desire for the false entelechy that is not divine and true (or that strays from the entelechy of literate Self). Thus, the literate voice of *Photographic Memory* leads toward resurrection.

Augustine’s main inquiry in Book X of *Confessions* reiterates the crux of my logological project. Augustine asks: how does knowing the Self lead to knowledge of God? His question can be rephrased for my purpose: how does literate voice facilitate discourse? How does a logology of the moving image generate knowledge of concepts? One method involves tracking how dialectic, negative, and hierarchy construct the literate turn toward entelechy—the shift from one state to another that culminates in attitude. I outline this practice in Chapter Three on *Time Indefinite*. Another logological technique charts how entelechy (the “god-term” of literate voice) permeates autobiographical reflection on one or more interrelated concepts. This method is
useful in analyzing autobiographical texts like *Photographic Memory*, where events unfold in a more temporally sporadic narrative sequence. The remainder of this chapter employs this latter approach. McElwee’s attitude results from the entelechy he moves toward—the turn from mortality to resurrection. The key is the turn, or the movement within literate selfhood. Without movement, entelechy is difficult to locate.

*Photographic Memory* opens with a scene between Adrian and Mariah from the past. The two pretend to box as McElwee’s camera playfully moves between them.\(^{11}\) Even though Mariah

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\(^{11}\) MacDonald identifies boxing as a metaphor for the struggle between Adrian and Ross in *Photographic Memory*. If *In Paraguay* represents “Round 1” (dedicated to Mariah), *Photographic Memory* could certainly represent “Round 2” (dedicated to Adrian). Each film focuses on one of McElwee’s children. See *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary*, 232.
appears several times in the film, *Photographic Memory* is clearly about the relationship between Ross and Adrian. In fact, the complicated bond between the father and son takes visual form in one particular shot as Ross prepares to return to Brittany. As Adrian sits in a café staring at his laptop, Ross shoots him through a window. The reflection of Ross filming Adrian results in a superimposition that expresses the complex interplay of memory, time, and digital technology in the film. This meta-image sets off a series of transitions between Ross’s documentation of Saint-Quay and reflection on Adrian, but it also indicates one of several movements in the film: the turn from literate media toward digital technologies. Moreover, this turn also relays the vicissitudes of memory. How does literate media facilitate an idealization of McElwee’s memory? What happens to this process once he switches to digital video in *Photographic Memory*? The shot of Adrian and a reflected Ross encapsulates all of these concerns in bridging the analog and digital representations scattered throughout the film in one shot. This meta-image embodies the turn from mortality to resurrection much as the image of the pier expresses the turn from death to life in *Time Indefinite*.

Many have pointed out that time freezes in analog photography, but some overlook that time ceases to exist in moving images as well. While photos provide a different kind of memory than moving images (a photographic memory), McElwee seems more concerned about the shift
from literacy to electryc from literacy to electryc than the fetishization of dying media forms in *Photographic Memory*. What kind of resurrection does *Photographic Memory* offer as its “god-term”? Does resurrection signify a renewal of modes of representation now lost, or an experience more closely aligned with time than memory? This question recalls the tautological cycle of *Time Indefinite*, the movement from death to life repeatedly. However, twenty years later, this movement now hinges on the apparatus shift currently underway. Instead of choosing to limit or eliminate the process of mediation in the creation of memories, we nearly have reached the point where the choice no longer exists. We *undergo* mediation as digital technologies continuously permeate the physical senses in all accounts of life. Whereas two decades ago it was easier to identify how digital media reprogrammed popular memory in films like *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), and *Nixon* (Oliver Stone, 1995), we now have established a culture of constant exposure to digital technology.12 For example, digital devices like Fitbit monitor our heart rate while we sleep.

McEwhee seeks to (re)experience a more idealized time in which he and Adrian were happier. While some filmmakers refuse to embrace digital media, Ross does not resemble a celluloid purist or a luddite. Instead, the literate tools of the past provide a particular kind of memory for Ross, one where entelechy still seemed possible through marriage and fatherhood. McEwhee’s initial resistance to embrace electracy mirrors his uncertainty with how to relate to his son growing up. To understand Adrian, McEwhee begins to reconstruct (resurrect) his own past by looking through hundreds of photographs he took in the 1970s when he lived in France. Ross did not store some of the negatives properly, and consequently some show the decay of

12 In calling for a reevaluation of film studies at the dawn of the new millennium, Anne Friedberg foresaw digital technologies as the *modem (modus) operandi* of everyday life. See “The End of Cinema: Multimedia and Technological Change,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 449.
Ross explains he does not recognize most of the places and people in the photos, but viewing them awakens a romanticized notion of returning to the land—of returning to Nature and the experience of time.

McElwee shows Adrian the journals he kept in France filled with ideas for novels and stories, notes on photography, drawings, sketches, and excerpts from books. Surprisingly, Ross cannot recall what he was thinking or feeling during the period; the journals seem to preserve the memories of someone else. The first mention of Maud in *Photographic Memory* occurs while Ross and Adrian look through the journals; her name appears in written form at the top of a page. The figure of Maud holds unique significance because she mostly exists in McElwee’s hazy physical memory—he only has a few photographs of her to help him remember their past together. The unreliable nature of memory reveals itself further at the film’s conclusion as McElwee’s attitude toward resurrection emerges. He locates Maud towards the end of his return.
to France only to find she remembers their relationship differently. In this moment, photographic memory achieves resurrection vis-à-vis digital video, exhibiting the instability of all forms of memory (physical, analog, and digital).

When Vivian Sobchack in 1999 described QuickTime’s half-life struggle to become, few could have predicted the rapid development of digital technologies over the next fifteen years.13 Pinocchio has transformed into a real boy, so to speak, and the digital can now accurately mimic or duplicate André Bazin’s romantic vision of the cinematic. As digital memory strays further away from the untidy structures of human memory, the “aura of loss” Sobchack connected to QuickTime’s infancy and Joseph Cornell’s boxes seems increasingly a distant symptom of the past. McElwee confronts his own panic of loss in *Photographic Memory* in returning to Saint-Quay. The memories preserved in his old photographs give way to new memories captured by digital video. While some things in Saint-Quay have changed, many have stayed the same—the wholeness of the analog past still lingers in the digital present, but not completely. For example, when Ross returns to the café where he first met Maurice, he finds that it has warped over time and its façade has been renovated. McElwee describes feeling trapped in this warp. The contrast between analog and digital reveals itself in looking at McElwee’s 1970s photograph of the café side by side with a digital screen capture of the renovated site. The updated digital image exudes a coldness compared to the analog; McElwee’s digital video captures the dust and loneliness of the café as a forgotten glass of wine sits on a table by a window. Although the place is the same, the digital image has no façade, no pretense or masquerade. A flatness consumes the digital image of the café, its former aura of romance regulated to the mundane. Perhaps part of McElwee’s quest in *Photographic Memory* involves removing the façade of his physical and

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Figure 4-13. *Photographic Memory* – The café. A) Before (analog) and B) after (digital).

analog memories to learn how to live in the digital age. He must follow Adrian into the limitless realm of vast networks and ephemeral memories to resurrect an experience of time, one that acknowledges façade yet seeks to resurrect its affective beauty.

Eventually, after talking with his former employer’s ex-wife Helene, McElwee learns that Maurice has passed away. He also discovers that Maurice lived a secret life, one that involved taking nude photographs. Apparently, the negatives that Ross lost years ago had something to do with Maurice’s side business. Consequently, Maurice (and the memory of the man) only exists in photographs in the film. Maurice haunts *Photographic Memory* like a ghost, unable to experience the resurrection of time that McElwee seeks. Ross even alludes to a chemical blotch on the 1970s photograph of the café as the phantom of Maurice. Maurice’s paranormal presence manifests itself within the façade of literate media. Ross recalls Maurice used to say there were secrets to be revealed in the most mundane of photographs. These secrets indicate what McElwee hopes to recover and relive.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) McElwee speculates that *Photographic Memory* could have been a much different film if he was unable to find the people he was looking for in France. He explains, “I did have a Plan B in case I never found any of the people I was looking for. Plan B would have entailed making a much more atmospheric and meditative movie—more on the order of something by Chris Marker—wall-to-wall narration with no sync-sound interactions with any human beings. I could describe it as ‘Marker-esque’ to my French producers and they would be happy enough. Another alternative was to hire French actors to play Maurice and Maud, which would then allow me to pontificate.
Photographic Memory: Time

Books XI-XIII of Augustine’s *Confessions* address the creation of the world as described in Genesis. In Book XI, Augustine considers the concepts of time and eternity. He explains that God is timeless and dwells in eternity, outside of human perceptions of past, present, and future. However, if God (or any conceptual form of the ineffable) transcends language, how can we write of eternity or the concept of timelessness? Furthermore, how can we perceive or measure the concept of time? Augustine concludes that time resembles a *distentio* (extension) of human memory and perception. The concept of time results from how the mind negotiates *distentio*. 

Attention focuses on the present, memory on the past, and expectation on the future.

Burke suggests that from a logological point of view we experience *formaliter*, the relation between time and timelessness, as the relation between words and their meaning. The meaning of a sentence (what Burke calls *essence*) transcends the material words used to construct it. One cannot determine the meaning of a sentence if one does not understand its language. Conversely, matter (materiality) can exert its effect on us whether we comprehend it or not. Burke explains, “We must know what the words ‘Step aside’ mean, if we are to obey them. But a push can have the same effect without our having to understand its ‘meaning.’” While the visual and audible dimensions of moving images belong to the temporal realm, Burke would argue that their meaning transcends their materiality; meaning occurs in another dimension (i.e. timelessness, eternity). Augustine reminds us that time leaves us fragmented and that only God

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on the relationship of documentary to fiction, past to present, etcetera. I could label this approach ‘Godardian’ and again appease my French producers. I’m very glad I was not forced to employ either of those approaches.” (MacDonald, “Alive and Well,” 48).


16 Ibid., 142-143.
exists outside the confusion of time. Both language and time cloud our understanding of God and the entelechy that “god-terms” suggest.

One well-known example of a film series whose language or literate voice obscures its entelechy is Matthew Barney’s five-part *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002). Made over a period of eight years, Barney’s magnum opus has prompted several interpretations. Many analyses draw on Barney’s own thoughts in interviews or synopses on artist Eric Doeringer’s *Cremaster Fanatic* fan site. However, most viewers could never comprehend the complex intertextuality of the series solely from its formal design. For example, *Cremaster 2* (1999) retells the biography of Gary Gilmore, a Mormon sentenced to death in Utah for killing two men in 1976. Even with substantial spoken dialogue (which the other parts of the *Cremaster Cycle* lack), *Cremaster 2*’s labyrinthine narrative resists clear interpretation. Most viewers will not know about the false myth that Harry Houdini was Gilmore’s grandfather and associate it with Barney’s casting of Norman Mailer as Houdini in the film. Even fewer will know the details of Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* (1979), or connect the death of a bull on the Bonneville Salt Flats with Gilmore’s execution and the lost tribes of Israel. Nevertheless, it does not matter if we do not comprehend every detail of the film’s literate voice. Like a physical push, the film’s material elicits a unique effect, one more akin to installation art than traditional narrative drama. My point
in mentioning Barney’s film is to suggest that logology might untangle the puzzling temporal
dimensions of the film (its matter or materiality) through tracing the patterns of its “god-term.”
What this “god-term” is remains to be seen, but a summarizing term could show how the film’s
formal patterns signify literate selfhood, or how its path toward entelechy results in its stance or
attitude toward reality.

The formal structure of Photographic Memory does not resemble Barney’s elaborate
project. However, the technical (formal) problem that Burke suggests between the relationship of
time and eternity persists in McElwee’s autobiography. The individual shots of Photographic
Memory progress in a systematic temporal sequence, but the way they imply one another via
resurrection represents the logological counterpoint of eternity. Burke suggests eternity as the
essence of time. He begins to think about not how humans can live eternally, but how we can
attribute an eternal validity to principles conceived by texts.\(^{17}\) However, the paradox of moving
images lies in the fact that the past and future they represent can only unfold as mediated present.
Burke points out that even flashbacks in films conjure the same immediacy as incidents
happening “now.” So how can autobiographical documentary represent events that exist as both
presence and absence? McElwee’s work complicates this question further by recording voice-
over years later to accompany footage shot over a lifetime.

The eternal validity of resurrection relays the notion of timelessness or God. Eternity
represents the negative of time; the conceptual meaning of timelessness transcends the corporeal
realm. However, as Burke notices, “Whereas ‘eternity’ (‘timelessness’) is dialectically a
negative, it is far from such in Augustine’s rhetoric.”\(^{18}\) The same goes for the rhetoric of

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 146.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 151.
McElwee’s literate voice. Burke explains, “though the flower precedes the fruit, there is a sense in which both flower and fruit could be viewed as working towards culmination in a seed—and that point of view could suggest another kind of ‘first.’”\(^\text{19}\) In other words, although we cannot speak of eternity as being before or after time, the meanings that moving images create and the forms they take culminate as literate voice. Just as we cannot conceive of the biblical Father (God) or the Son (Christ) as the absolute beginning because both are logically co-eternal, resurrection and death do not signify the unqualified beginning or end of literate selfhood in *Photographic Memory*. Rather, McElwee’s film foregrounds resurrection as its “god-term” to participate in an endless tautological cycle of life and death. *Time Indefinite* accomplishes a similar task with its “god-term” mortality. Like God and Christ, resurrection and mortality endlessly imply one another. Furthermore, *Photographic Memory* not only conveys the concept of resurrection (eternity, timeless), it also performs the concept through its formal structure (materiality, time). The film’s literate voice demonstrates the resurrection of literate media, memory, and idealized love through its cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, and editing.

Burke suggests that the last four books of *Confessions* “recapitulate” the story of Augustine’s rebirth in the garden in a different way than the previous nine books.\(^\text{20}\) While the first half of *Confessions* pivots on the garden conversion, the latter half hinges on talk of beginnings. In Book X, Augustine enters memory with the intention of transcending it (“The Upward Way”). He uses the language of the temporal realm to discuss that which transcends the material (a movement from time toward eternity). By Book XIII, Augustine moves from eternity back down toward time (“The Downward Way”). If the first nine books end with the death of

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\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 156-157.
Monica, the final episcopal section ends on what Burke calls the “Book of the Holy Spirit.” The theme of rest in Book XIII parallels the notion of absolute familial love (Holy Spirit). Augustine explains that man cannot turn to God unless God has first turned to man. The weight of love pulls Augustine to his proper equilibrium with God.

In _Photographic Memory_, McElwee also enters memory with the intention of transcending it (“The Upward Way”). He wishes to relive the moments of idealized memory (eternity) and figuratively travels back in time to undergo his resurrection. However, as the film proceeds, Ross, like Augustine, finds himself moving from timelessness back toward time. While McElwee’s memories appear as literate media (photographs, journals, 16mm and 35mm film footage), much of _Photographic Memory_ unfolds in the digital present. The images that document the return to Saint-Quay and Adrian as a young adult fall into the categories of _ideal_ and _imperfect_, each implying the cycle of resurrection and death. Ideal images correspond to visuals that signify a life unaffected by time and technological development, while imperfect images remind McElwee of Adrian’s turn toward adulthood and the age of electracy. Both ideal and imperfect images imply one another; they move toward and away from entelechy. For example, the beginning of the film frames Mariah in relationship to idealized familial love, much like McElwee represents Adrian in earlier films. Ross’s daughter reads S. E. Hinton’s _The Outsiders_ (1967) while Adrian escapes into cyberspace. Mariah accompanies her father to the pumpkin patch while Adrian works on producing skiing videos with his friends to post on the internet. McElwee’s idealization has little to do with how he feels toward each of his children; he loves them both. Instead, his attitude toward resurrection pivots on his negotiation of time. The ideal resurrection seeks to reanimate the moments of the literate past while the imperfect resurrection struggles with adaptation (survival) in the digital age. The imperfect resurrection
Figure 4-15. *Photographic Memory* – Ideal vs. imperfect. A) Mariah reads and B) Adrian surfs.

takes place in the realm of the digital—where the romantic façade of literate media ceases to exist. The imperfect resurrection indicates the reconfiguration of literacy into electrate forms—the phoenix rises from the ashes and disseminates into technological overload.

As McElwee continues his journey, he slowly begins to move back toward time (“The Downward Way”). He learns that the ideal resurrection of the past may not be possible. The interplay of ideal and imperfect resurrection appears most explicitly in images of Saint-Quay during McElwee’s return. Ross’s photographs from the 1970s represent tangible markers of idealized memory—objects that enable the promise of ideal resurrection. He seeks to resurrect their façade in the digital present. However, when Ross arrives in Saint-Quay, he finds the commune’s exoticness, its façade, has faded. No longer does fish soup seem extraordinary. McElwee holds up a half filled wine glass, determined to see the world as he did years ago. Saint-Quay has changed (turned), just as Adrian has.

When McElwee wakes up on a market day, he begins to think about the times he and Maud worked together in the open air. He sees a woman at the market, Laurence, who resembles Maud. Laurence and her husband Laurent work the market as Ross and Maud once did, but in a radically different capacity. Laurence and Laurent are older and appear less idealistic than Ross’s description of himself in the 1970s. The connection between past and present seems vague as
McElwee tries to resurrect the idealized memory of the past through the representation of two middle-aged grocers. Ross later asks another vendor if he recognizes an old photo of Maud. The vendor replies, “No, I don’t recognize her.” McElwee receives confirmation that idealized memory cannot exist in the digital present.

As McElwee begins to accept the process of time, he learns that it undoes the representations of memory; memory cannot capture or stop time. Ross associates literate media and memory with materiality when he cuts to footage of Adrian at the beach about halfway through the film. He asks, “Where are the photos? What happened to film—16mm film that you can actually hold in your hand?” McElwee then describes the warmth and luminosity of

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film over an image of Adrian digging for sand fleas. The moment connects the idealized memory of a younger Adrian with the materiality of literate media. Most importantly, the nostalgic look backwards links the façade of literate media with material warmth. Does the digital then generate coldness and immateriality? Or has the development of time merely fractured analog entelechy—the speed of progress too much for older generations to process? McElwee suggests the memory of Adrian as a child remains in the obnoxious teenager. However, time erases the façade of literate media and erodes the punctum or third meaning of idealized memory. Its warmth and luminosity dissipates.

McElwee’s attitude toward resurrection results from an acceptance of time and electrate media forms. His turn occurs when he locates Maud with the help of Helene. Finding Maud allows Ross to realize that the literate objects of memory have told another version of the past that he no longer recognizes or remembers. The experience of time offers another version of Maud. Time changes people and places, and the media we use to remember also undergoes a resurrection. **Photographic Memory** offers a meditation on media evolution as it traces the artist’s journey from a photographer to filmmaker to digital videomaker. McElwee’s literate

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Figure 4-19. *(nostalgia)* (1971) – The evolution from photographer to filmmaker.

voice undergoes a digital resurrection and his attitude toward memory, time, and technology reflects this rebirth.

**Photographic Memory: Digital Technology**

In his landmark book *Visionary Film*, P. Adams Sitney identifies Hollis Frampton’s *(nostalgia)* (1971) as an autobiographical work that “retraces the artist’s evolution from a still photographer to a filmmaker.” Frampton’s film displaces the continuity between sound (voice-over) and image by displaying burning photographs on a hot plate while Michael Snow reads commentary about the photographs before they appear onscreen. If *(nostalgia)* marks a transition from one form of literate media to another, *Photographic Memory* signals McElwee’s turn from one apparatus (literacy) to another (electracy).

For many, the decline of the cinematic signals the decay of the index or trace of the image. The digital has historically been associated with the ephemeral, abstract, or numerical, and the romantic notion of the analog index and its connection to reality has come under fire

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Figure 4-20. *Photographic Memory* – Digitized memory. A) The center of town shot on a memory card, B) no film or video—the turn toward electracy, and C) “What if the memory cards fail?”

since the widespread adoption of digital technologies. Some question if the concept of the trace or index is now irrelevant. At some point, intention and Nature (the unexpected) collide to construct the reality we think we see in a photograph. So how does the digital affect this process?

What happens to the index in the digital age?

Peter Geimer reminds us that in scientific photography, pictures do not merely document what could already be seen (i.e. reality or perception), but establish a condition of vision. He points out that a photograph of a radioactive substance or a galaxy allows scientists to see what

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they could not otherwise. Thus, scientific photography resembles a medium of registering vision rather than a representation of reality or human perception. Could digital video also constitute a condition of vision? Does the façade of literate media cloud rather than enhance the ability to see beyond corporeal perception? Does the digital allow access to something else beyond sight?

Photographic Memory marks the first time McElwee has shot on a camera that uses memory cards instead of film stock or video cassettes. Digital media makes Ross nervous, and he begins to think about its ephemeral nature. What happens if the memory cards fail? Analog memory captured by literate media seems to reassure McElwee that his physical memory will not fail; for him, a connection between physical memory and photographic memory exists. But what about digital memory? Is the materiality associated with analog media really gone in digital representations? Some scholars say the answer is no. The digital often insinuates an association with the atemporal, immaterial dimensions of the database, while analog media embodies the temporal dimensions of narrative. However, as Marsha Kinder explains, database and narrative can exist at once—in a sense, all narratives and databases select from available materials to formulate patterns and categories.26

Homay King suggests Agnès Varda’s The Gleaners and I (2000) maintains a relationship to the tangible and time-bound, despite its digital form.27 For King, Varda’s focus on matter, body, and duration in the film constructs (among other things) a materialist and phenomenological cinema, one concerned with the fate of material objects and the experience of the senses. Varda’s film parallels Photographic Memory in several ways. The Gleaners and I

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signals the digital resurrection of Varda’s literate voice after decades of shooting on film, and, like McElwee, she often addresses the camera and makes reference to the process of time. Domietta Torlasco proposes Varda’s film traces its own process and she offers a brief analysis of a memorable scene that appears halfway through the film to illuminate this idea. As Varda drives in her car, she starts to film the trucks in the lane beside her. She moves her left hand in front of the lens and begins to frame each passing vehicle with her hand before closing it. Varda remarks, “I’d like to capture them. To retain things passing? No, just to play.” The scene then

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cuts to a rapid series of similar gestures by Varda; she repeatedly tries to grasp several passed trucks over a period of time. Torlasco concludes, “In The Gleaners and I, there is no confusion between the hand that films and the hand that is being filmed, the pressure or folding that one hand exercises on the other being always reversible and never fully realized.” In other words, gleaning or digital videomaking resembles a form of writing that embodies perception or materiality, despite the immaterial nature of its data.

In a 1986 interview, Varda coined the term *cinécriture* to describe a form of cinematic writing that includes everything from the scripting of scenarios and location scouting to direction and editing. As a form of digital self-portraiture or autobiography, Torlasco identifies The Gleaners and I’s *cinécriture* as one that unfolds “not despite but through the body, challenging a tradition of thought as old and self-assured as that of Western metaphysics.” Varda shoots one hand with the other, displacing the Cartesian divide while emphasizing the ubiquity of digital technology. Perhaps the pervasiveness of digital technology plays a role in the decay of façade and the mistrust of digital media’s supposed immateriality. The digital at once conjures the ephemeral yet represents a media form that constantly monitors our physical bodies. Could a digital *cinécriture* transcend mere representation to elicit a mode or condition of modern vision? If so, what conditions need to be in place to illuminate what voice could resemble in electracy?

McElwee realizes how ubiquitous computing has changed human relationships as he talks to Adrian via video chat on his laptop. As Ross tries to talk to his son despite technical difficulty, the beauty of the Saint-Quay coastline looms in the background of the shot’s *mise-en-

\[29\] Ibid.


Figure 4-22. Photographic Memory – Digital divide. A) “I really need a laptop to work” and B) everyone is a photographer now.

scène. The contrast between literate symbolic action and electrate discourse takes explicit visual form in the shot as Adrian describes his need for a new computer in order to complete his work. Later, Ross accompanies Eric Beranger, a local photographer, to a wedding where he notices the majority of guests taking photographs with digital cameras. McElwee comments, “I also seem to remember that back when Maurice and I did weddings, we were the only ones taking photographs.” Ross later discussed the digital’s connection to the divide between generations:

Yes, the ways in which the new digital imagemaking technology stands in as a metaphor for the difference between my generation and my son’s is an obvious theme, as are fading memories and the passing of time. Getting older and having to master entirely new technical approaches to filmmaking has been daunting—at least for me. Adrian absorbs all of this so effortlessly, while I struggle. As I say in the film, this was the first time I had shot with a camera that relied on memory cards and I was initially distrustful about a technology that did not rely on videotape, much less film stock. It often felt as if I were trafficking in vapors. I spent countless hours in Saint-Quay—which was far from Paris with its equipment rental and repair facilities—insecurely checking my memory cards each evening, making multiple copies of footage I had shot during the day on external drives. But as I exported my material and made backup dubs, I would indeed see the visual evidence that what I thought had transpired actually had and that I had managed to capture a fair amount of it.\(^{32}\)

Technology marks both a shift between apparati and cultural generations. On the surface, the immense storage capacity of digital media appears to solve the limitations of analog media;

\(^{32}\) MacDonald, “Alive and Well,” 49.
information does not degrade over time. However, the capabilities of digital media results in another problem: there is simply too much information available in the world these days to claim mastery in any subject. Ubiquitous computing has led to a dissolution of attention and memory that some describe as a kind of loss.33 How does this loss affect identity formation in the digital age? What happens to literate voice in digital media?

José van Dijck suggests that personal photography has often represented a means of autobiographical remembering first and identity formation second, but claims digital media has reversed this binary.34 Furthermore, she suggests that the digital allows for a different kind of idealized memory, one that draws on both personal and unauthorized manipulation and distribution. While older generations retain analog photographs as memory tools, younger generations use digital photos and videos as peer-building devices. Van Dijck proposes that young people are less interested in photos as permanent keepsakes and instead consider them as social experiences. The younger generations also anticipate the interception of their personal images by others, leading to a new attitude where personal memory transcends privatization. However, Van Dijck insists digitization has not caused this shift. Instead, a cultural move toward individualization and ubiquitous computing has prompted the transition. The digital age has enacted a new conception of community, one distanced from traditional familial bonding that associates camera phones and social media with notions of Self.

McElwee documents this cultural shift in images of Adrian immersed in technological exchange with his peers. Ross’s son uses his phone and laptop to maintain hundreds of


relationships—a form of digital life support. Adrian eventually finds a real girlfriend, Alex, but even the brief glimpse of the young couple in *Photographic Memory* demonstrates the hold that technology has on the younger generation. As Ross introduces Alex in the film, she appears lost in technological overload. She and Adrian sit at a table glued to their laptops. Even though the young couple have just shared a meal, neither of them face one another nor engage in
A) The church (analog) and B) the church (digital).

conversation. Instead, Adrian talks on his cell phone about the weather while Alex loses herself in cyberspace.

McElwee later finds a kindred spirit to whom he can lament the loss he feels for analog media. Cecile Le Brun works for the Saint-Quay office of tourism and takes photographs for brochures and postcards. Cecile debates the difference between shooting on film and digital video, and she explains that we no longer have the physical connection to photographs—we do not touch digital photos. Like Ross, she associates materiality with a kind of warmth that seems absent in the digital age. Where are the photos?

Perhaps instead of asking, “where are the photos?” we might ask “where is the façade?”

What happened to the romance, trust, and warmth associated with analog media and the cultural conditions that made the idealization of memory commonplace? Ross provides another comparison between a photograph from the 1970s and its digital counterpart when he accompanies Eric, owner of Morgan’s Photos, to a wedding. In McElwee’s photograph, a statue of a crucified Jesus stands next to a church where Ross and Maurice worked at a wedding. Jesus has since disappeared, and Ross wonders if atheistic vandals have stolen it? Maybe Christ has relocated or experienced resurrection? McElwee remembers how Maurice used to talk about
the mysterious way time wears on a photograph, slowly eroding it until all of its context is gone. Maurice called this process decontextualization. Sometimes it would only take a few days, and other times, decades. What happens to context in the digital age? Does the speed and ease of distribution erase context? When an image appears on tens of thousands of websites and then disperses onto millions of digital devices, how can we begin to locate its context?

The conclusion of Photographic Memory reveals McElwee’s attitude toward the resurrection of his literate voice in digital media. The film’s final act also brings the tautological cycle of life and death full circle: Adrian embarks on a filmmaking career as father and son figuratively return to the pier. However, prior to these last moments, McElwee’s turn occurs when he locates Maud in the realm of Nature. With the help of Helene, Ross calls Maud and agrees to meet at her house for lunch. The former lovers look at old photographs and reminiscence about their past together. Maud describes her literate Self in the photos and her physical Self as still the same person, at least in her mind. Ross learns that Maud’s husband has died and that she has suffered two heart attacks. Obviously, time has decontextualized the photographs. The older versions of Ross and Maud speak as strangers yet still hold onto the connection they shared years ago. Ross hesitantly talks to Maud about their relationship—she asks him to turn off the camera. The two remember their past differently, and Ross’s turn occurs
because he accepts the inconsistency of memory. Context, façade, idealized memory, and warmth fade as time evolves. The resurrection of McElwee’s literate voice into electrate form emerges when he sees Maud again. He accepts the Maud in his memory and the older version as the same person. Ideal and imperfect images coexist within the Maud of the digital present. Memory never captures truth or time, but neither do moving images. The experience of finding Maud leads to a renewed acceptance of Adrian’s journey into adulthood and the digital technologies that enable this transition.

The final sequence of *Photographic Memory* shows Ross and Adrian on the Carolina coast during a fishing trip. McElwee cuts from a shot of Adrian texting while fishing to footage of a younger Adrian fishing off a pier. Like Maud, the younger version of Adrian still exists in the Adrian of the digital present. The next day, Adrian comes up with an idea for a film and Ross assists as his camera operator. Adrian plays a hipster who wakes up, drinks a beer, and walks to the beach. Ross finds himself recalling memories of filming Adrian as a child at the beach as he films his son’s project in the same location. The final shot of the film echoes the last shot of *Bright Leaves*. However, instead of racing towards the ocean to return a fish to its habitat, the older Adrian puts on his headphones and begins to run.
Obviously, the final shot of *Photographic Memory* signals a renewal of life for Adrian, a resurrection. His renews his commitment to work when he decides to pursue film school. Adrian physically moves away from Ross while continuing his father’s work as a career. The cycle moves into the future, extending the pattern began in McElwee’s early films. A cyclical identity exists at every turn, page, or shot that constructs literate voice. The motivations of literate voice are timeless even though we experience them as time. Just as we can identify Augustine’s motivations in the theft of the pears, McElwee’s motivations emerge in his earliest films and continue as the cycle of life and death repeats. Burke reminds us, “the things that happen to us do not acquire their identity from themselves alone, but also reflect the character of the way in which we confront them.” How a text is written transcends what it could mean. A logology of the moving image provides a method for reducing a filmmaker’s literate voice to a few basic designs. As a result, conceptual understanding manifests as literate selfhood in the voice of moving images.

35 MacDonald elaborates further on the final shot of *Photographic Memory*, noting the significance of its *mise-en-scène*. “The closing shot, of Adrian running into the distance along the beach, is deeply poignant. Adrian, the protagonist of his own film, is moving away from Ross and Ross’s nostalgic memories of Adrian as a child and yet is maintaining his relationship with his father by becoming a filmmaker and by having Ross film him: they are simultaneously separating and coming together. But the final shot is more complicated than this, because throughout it, Ross’s shadow is visible, first on Adrian’s body, then once Adrian runs off, in the bottom left of the frame. For anyone familiar with McElwee’s long career, that shadow is an emblem not merely of the past within this film, but of the many similar shadows in Ross’s long cinematic chronicle of the McElwee family. Did Adrian ask Ross to include his shadow as an emblem of the fact that Adrian cannot entirely leave Ross behind, or is this a final, somewhat sardonic suggestion by Ross that he simply cannot stay entirely out of Adrian’s life? However one understands the shadow, what does seem clear is that through the making of *Photographic Memory*, the implicit stasis emblemized in the superimposed shot of Adrian and Ross at the café early in the film has been transformed into the complex synergy of two men struggling to retrieve what they can from their shared, lost past and working creatively together to move their lives forward.” (*American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary*, 237).

CHAPTER 5
THE TURN FROM LITERACY TO ELECTRACY: VOICE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The evolution of writing, from a mnemonic practice into a complex system, corresponds to
the invention of graphical devices intended to indicate how words communicate once distributed
into the world. Like alphabetic writing, documentary films attempt to represent the historical world
in the pursuit of rhetoric—documentary distinguishes itself from mere document through its capacity
to structure the realm of Nature in a particular way. Observing the literate voice of autobiographical
documentary offers a way to study how personal experience informs the negotiation of philosophical
and political concepts. Most significantly, the literate conception of voice indicates documentary
filmmaking as a form of discourse: voice escapes the status of a record or representation of the
spoken voice. However, literate voice does not signify a text’s meaning, point of view, or narrative
authority—it establishes an author’s motives. Literate voice reveals the entelechy, or ideal conceptual
perfection that motivates all documentary filmmakers. By mapping the dialectical, negative, and
hierarchical structures in moving images, a filmmaker’s attitude or stance toward reality materializes.

A logology of the moving image provides a way to map a film’s formal design onto a
central concept or “god-term” that drives the entelechy that motivates filmmakers. Charting the
formal patterns of autobiographical documentary reveals the rhetoric of images, but this process
is not scientific. Kenneth Burke’s logology plays with both the precision and ambiguity of
language, refusing to draw absolute conclusions about symbolic action. Logology foregrounds
rhetoric in the service of discourse—it chronicles the process (“The Upward Way”) of
representing the objects of Nature as literate discourse. Discourse enables conceptual
understanding, and logology uncovers the rhetoric of concepts in the language of individuals.

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1 Garlitz, 21.
Logology promotes a notion of Self removed from ontological stability and instead represents a mode of inquiry, a form of writing.

In his essay “The ‘Cinema of Poetry,’” Pier Paolo Pasolini argues that images lack an elaborate system of discourse. Unlike words, images can signify an infinite number of possible meanings and do not succumb to the rules of grammar. The filmmaker must select *im-signs* or image-signs from the chaos of Nature and aestheticize them. If dictionaries and style guides govern words or *lin-signs*, then images rely on conventions to produce meanings. After all, as Pasolini points out, conventions are stylistic before they are grammatical. No one claims an incorrect usage of the image of a wheel. He explains that clothing of the 1930s and cars of the 1950s represent “things” that lack an etymology—a filmmaker cannot provide a universal meaning or history to any single image. However, images do belong to a common patrimony—nearly everyone who sees the image of a wheel has also seen an actual wheel with their own eyes. The common visual patrimony that all humans share gives the objects of Nature the potential to become symbolic signs.

Pasolini suggests that filmmakers choose the objects of Nature as syntagmas that possess two histories at once: a *grammatical* history in the moment of selection and a *pregrammatical* history connected to the realm of Nature. While past scholarship has charted the pregrammatical history of the documentary image in detail, my work provides a method to trace its grammatical history. While Pasolini recognizes that images themselves do not signify direct conceptual expression, the literate voice of moving images does possess the capacity for philosophical and political communication. The documentary image amplifies the double nature of visual communication and rhetoric: it exists explicitly in-between the realms of objectivity and

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subjectivity. While the pregrammatical aspects of the documentary image always persist, the stylization, selection, and organization of visual material reflects an ideological and poetic vision that indicates literate selfhood.

In the digital age, the apparatus shift from literacy to electracy has mutated the concept of voice. If the spoken word in oral cultures generated religion as its dominant rhetorical practice, and the written word in literate cultures produced science, electracy initiates a post-literate institution based on the networked digital image. Gregory Ulmer suggests that entertainment or appetite directs the rhetorical strategy of the new apparatus formation underway. In other words, the affective body now plays a more significant role in how our culture experiences the Self in modern society. For Ulmer, identity construction shifts away from essence and toward a collective, political dimension in electracy. To illustrate this, he introduces concept avatar as the electrate equivalent of voice in literacy and spirit in orality. Avatar is what we already are and provides a way to think about the collective experience of becoming image online. Identity formation in electracy pivots (turns) on the communication between the sensory experiences of collective and individual being. The metaphysics of electracy operates in the dimension of attraction/repulsion (pleasure/pain), and Ulmer asks what happens in contemporary civic life when attraction/repulsion has equal status relative to right/wrong (orality) and true/false (literacy)? The conversion to pleasure opens a new domain of identity formation in electracy: brand.

3 Gregory L. Ulmer, Electronic Monuments (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxiii.


5 Ibid., 41.
The next stage of my work on documentary and grammatology focuses on the apparatus shift into electracy. What happens to voice in electracy, and how can we chart its new formation? In *Avatar Emergency*, Ulmer addresses the relationship between attitude and action. Avatar personifies attitude and has both supplemented and displaced the literate concept of Self. He suggests *prudence* as a way to think about attitude in electracy. Prudence functions as a time wisdom or “a capacity to make an appropriate decision in an instant by taking the measure of a particular situation in its temporal context.”\(^6\) The purpose and experience of concept avatar is to learn from the history of prudence or good judgment to facilitate “well-being.” The metaphysics of electracy provides the opportunity for the body to experience *jouissance*, and the Allegory of Prudence attempts to access the feeling of being alive and bring it into thought.\(^7\) Ulmer insists that concept avatar supports both feeling and thought through an identity formation that must be undergone, not just understood.

Since the identity experience of electracy no longer possesses the coherence of narrative form, a logology of the moving image will not suffice in the digital age. Networked images embody not logos or concepts, but appetite and urge. A parallel methodology, an *orniology*, could trace the post-literate landscape of electracy. Such a method will focus on the image in the context of affection, rather than the word in relationship to logic. One relay to begin thinking about an orniology based on images is the design work of 23 Envelope, a partnership between graphic designer Vaughan Oliver and photographer/filmmaker Nigel Grierson, who primarily worked for the British independent record label 4AD from 1983 to 1988. Following Grierson’s departure from 23 Envelope in 1988, Oliver continued to design for 4AD under the brand v23.

\(^6\) Ibid., xvi.

\(^7\) Ibid., 27.
The remarkable work of 23 Envelope and v23 helped build the brand of 4AD through the image design of the label’s album sleeves. Most artists on 4AD gave Oliver and Grierson creative license to design their record covers, resulting in groups as dissimilar as Throwing Muses and Cocteau Twins entering into a collective visual dimension that would define their image, or, in a sense, their avatar. In the 1985 documentary 23 Envelope, the partners discuss their creative process as one grounded in affect rather than commerce, or by extension, logic. Grierson explains, “I think the most important thing about our approach to record covers ... is that we try to achieve an image quality which is more abstract and closer to the feeling of the music ... to capture the atmosphere and the more formal aspects of the music. We rarely read lyrics and use that as a starting point ... it’s more through listening to the actual music.” In a recent interview, Oliver echoes Grierson’s description of 23 Envelope’s approach to design, “And in terms of reflecting music, texture has always been there for me. You can see music as textures, colours, ideas, or the words that pop out at you.”

Not surprisingly, Oliver has cited Andrei Tarkovsky’s The Mirror (1975), a film that relies more on texture and atmosphere than narrative for its effect, as an inspiration.

Looking at a sample of Oliver’s design work illuminates how radically different musical groups divided by gender, nationality, and sexuality can achieve (or undergo) avatar by way of affection rather than logic. The cover images of This Mortal Coil’s It’ll End in Tears (1984), Pixies’s Gigantic/River Euphrates (1988), His Name is Alive’s Livonia (1990), and Red House Painters’s Down Colorful Hill (1992) represent four diverse acts. This Mortal Coil’s gothic ethereal wave sounds nothing like the college rock of Pixies. Similarly, the experimental rock of His Name is Alive could not be mistaken for the acoustic guitar ballads of Red House Painters,...

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despite the fact that members of each band have collaborated. However, Oliver’s design is consistent in joining each release over an eight-year span under a visual aesthetic based on feeling, atmosphere, and mood. Oliver’s work and the 4AD brand are synonymous, and the designs enter into a collective realm where they represent the affective brand of the bands on the label. In a sense, Oliver’s design promotes well-being over commerce: the typography of his
covers do not foreground artist or album title. In addition, many of his designs run the risk of alienating mainstream audiences. For example, the cover of Pixies’s *Gigantic/River Euphrates* single depicts 4AD promotions man and former Lush manager Howard Gough’s naked, screaming son Josh—not exactly an image that would sell at Walmart. Regardless, Oliver’s work escalated to the realm of high art in the proceeding decades. Several institutions have featured his work, including the show *This Rimy River: Vaughan Oliver and v23 Graphic Works, 1988-94* at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles.

An orniology of the networked image will draw on the affective dimensions of the visual rather than a literate, conceptual notion of Self. However, the literate Self does not vanish in electracy, but instead enters into a collective dimension. In addition, belief does not disappear in electracy. Just as Burke suggested that we look for continuities in the development from Western theology to modern science, we must chart how symbolic action continues to motivate in electrate developments. In a 1981 essay, Burke explains, “Even the correcting of the problems produced by technology must be accomplished by technological means; they cannot be solved by abandoning the technological way of life, since our modes of livelihood are already so dependent upon its resourcefulness.” Although Burke viewed machines with skepticism throughout most of his career, he ultimately concluded that “man’s entelechy is technology.” Despite the fact that the perfection of technology may destroy the realm of Nature (the Bomb), Burke’s later writing indicates his approval of technology to solve modern dilemmas.

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11 Rueckert, 263.
Burke’s argument pivots on the idea that all technologies exist in relation to symbolic action. After all, alphabetic writing is a technology. Burke compares “technologism” to religion insofar as technology is viewed as an intrinsic good.\textsuperscript{12} But how can technology facilitate well-being instead of destruction? This key question will direct the future methodology of orniology. Burke determines that all technologies (instruments and methods) are like images—they suggest new sets of implications to ask, “what would happen if ...?”\textsuperscript{13} If logology provides a method to map the literate implications of autobiography, an orniology of the digital networked image will chart the electrate implications brought forth by emerging technologies. Inventing this method involves tracing how the affective body develops the electrate equivalents of dialectic, negative, and hierarchy to demonstrate virtue and show the prudence of avatar.

\textsuperscript{12} Burke, \textit{The Rhetoric of Religion}, 170.

\textsuperscript{13} Burke, “Variations on ‘Providence,’” 167.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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