Autobiography:
Essays Theoretical and Critical

Edited by James Olney

Eye for I:
Making and Unmaking
Autobiography in Film

Elizabeth W. Bruss

It is only natural that most writing about autobiography should be concerned with its "appearance"—when and how it first emerged, its shifting forms and emphases over time, the miracle and paradox of its elasticity, its capacity to capture what is most individual about each writer while remaining recognizably the same activity for them all. But it is equally interesting, and perhaps more timely, to ponder its "disappearance." How does a genre like autobiography, a genre characterized by its durability and flexibility, disappear? Not, I would propose, all at once, in a flaming apocalypse. Not with a melodramatic bang, not even (necessarily) with a whimper, not with clear symptoms of internal decay, disaffection, or cynicism. The disappearance of a genre is both subtler and more gradual; it is not a change in one genre alone but a change of the total environment, especially in the relative strength of alternative modes of expression. An activity that was once central and pervasive continues to have its practitioners and its audience, but they are fewer and their interests are more specialized. Such a displacement may even now be underway for autobiography, as part of a larger displacement (a change in the dominant systems of communication) affecting our culture as a whole. If film and video do come to replace writing as our chief means of recording, informing, and entertaining, and if (as I hope to show) there is no real cinematic equivalent for autobiography, then the autobiographical act as we

have known it for the past four hundred years could indeed become more and more recondite, and eventually extinct.

But there is more at stake than the loss of a single genre. First there is what the "intranslatability" of autobiography implies about language and film as semiotic institutions. All of the extant attempts at autobiographical film seem to run afoul of the same problems and end by becoming indistinguishable from biography, on the one hand, or expressionist cinema, on the other. The unity of subjectivity and subject matter—the implied identity of author, narrator, and protagonist on which classical autobiography depends—seems to be shattered by film; the autobiographical self decomposes, schisms, into almost mutually exclusive elements of the person filmed (entirely visible; recorded and projected) and the person filming (entirely hidden; behind the camera eye). Of course, this schism might be only a contingency, a failure peculiar to the group of filmmakers who happen to have made the effort. But when one considers how various these would-be cinematic autobiographers are—ranging from Cocteau to Woody Allen, from the documentary *Joyce at 34* to the hallucinatory *Chapaqua*—and notes how persistently, in spite of such variety, the same problems recur, coincidence hardly seems a satisfactory explanation. It must instead be something in the medium itself, something inherent in the organized set of practices that together constitute the institution we call cinema. The question then becomes what (conventionalized) understandings have been erected around the making and the viewing of films—assumptions embodied in the structure of participation associated with film and embedded in its very machinery—that interfere with the translation of autobiography from one medium to another. And what, in turn, is there in language to explain its peculiar fitness for autobiographical expression? The problems posed by autobiography thus show that the differences between the media are more than formal, that the most important distinction is not between images and sentences but between "signifying practices"—what these forms are organized to do, why they are so organized, and the consequences (social, epistemological, aesthetic) that these differences could have.[1]

[1] I borrow the phrase "signifying practice" from Julia Kristeva, although I extend it slightly to include pragmatic and social conventions as well as the logical principles that are Kristeva's chief concern. Cf. William F. Van Wert and Walter Mignolo, "Julia Kristeva: Cinematographic Semiotic Practice," *Sub-stance* 9 (1974): 97-114, and other arguments against purely formalistic criticism such as Marie-Christine Ques-

Film appears to lack the same capacity for self-observation and self-analysis that we associate with language and literature. We have grown so accustomed to this kind of introspective activity that it is difficult for us to appreciate its fragility—the peculiar combination of assumptions and prerogatives upon which it relies. What, then, are the implications for our notions of the self and of human subjectivity if the autobiographical "I" cannot survive the move from text to film intact—if there is no "eye" for "I"? We were apt to take autobiography, for all its local variations of design and reticence, as at least expressive of a common underlying reality—a self existing independently of any particular style of expression and logically prior to all literary genres and even to language itself. First, we have selfhood, a state of being with its own metaphysical necessity; and only then autobiography, a discourse that springs from that state of being and gives it voice. Such was the line of reasoning that Descartes used for his famous autobiographical demonstration of his own existence. The more radical the doubts expressed in the course of the *Meditations*, the more certain the being of the doubter. Descartes never considered whether the apparent order of cause and effect might not be reversed, whether the "doubter" might not be the product rather than the producer of the doubt. Perhaps subjectivity takes shape by and in its language rather than using language as a "vehicle" to express its own transcendental being.[2] This is certainly what the problematic status of autobiographical films seems to suggest. For if it is impossible to characterize and exhibit selfhood through film, then the apparent primacy of the self—its very existence—is called into question. The discourse that had seemed a mere reflection or instrument of the self becomes its foundation and sine qua non.

It has been said that "the world seen cinematically" is "the world seen without a self."[3] In the pages that follow I shall discuss why and how this is so. In addition I will try to suggest what this loss of self might ultimately mean. Indeed it need not be a loss at all but the beginning of a new enterprise that will transform classical autobi-

---

terbert, "Ideological Resistances Barring the Reading of Film as Text," *Enclitic* 1 (1977): 7-12, and Rosalind Coward, "Class, 'Culture,' and the Social Formation," *Screen* 18, no. 1 (1977): 75-105.

   [2] Such is the brunt of the various assaults mounted in recent years on the Cartesian "cogito" by Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida—from whom I depart insofar as I treat the self as an arbitrary cultural fact but *not* a delusion.

   [3] Frank D. McConnell, *The Spoken Seen* (Baltimore, 1975), p. 113.

ography into something else and will transform along with it the organization of experience that autobiography both presupposes and helps to maintain. As a new signifying practice, film is (potentially) capable of reordering our expectations and channeling our experience in new and fruitful ways, altering old ideas about the nature of character and individual identity. There is, of course, no guarantee that these possibilities will be exploited; in fact, a good deal of popular film seems to be devoted to salvaging familiar notions and reassuring us that they are still adequate for the way we live now. Nor are all the foreseeable consequences of this reordering of experience equally palatable. Instead of overcoming the old antagonisms between self and other, mind and matter, film might only exaggerate them, or fuel the tendency toward passive consumption and a sense of individual powerlessness that already threaten us. But it is premature to speak of possible effects until we have the causes more fully in view.

The problems of film autobiography are many. Several logically separate issues are involved—our notions of authorship, the difference between narrating (on the one hand) and perceiving or "focalizing" (on the other), the conventions of representational realism—issues that must be unraveled before one can understand the various ways in which cinematic autobiography can fail. The power of film to depict most aspects of character is indisputable, and it is clearly capable of rendering narrative sequence as well as language. It is not, then, the auto*biography* that is the source of the difficulties but the circumstances under which that *auto*biography is told. The generic "force" of autobiography and the leading features that have distinguished it throughout its history from other kinds of discourse are contextual rather than formal. There is no narrative sequence, no stipulated length, no metrical pattern, and no style that is unique to autobiography or sufficient to set it apart from biography or even fiction. To count as autobiography a text must have a certain implicit situation, a particular relationship to other texts and to the scene of its enactment. Three parameters define this situation and give classical autobiography its peculiar generic value:

Truth-value.   An autobiography purports to be consistent with other evidence; we are conventionally invited to compare it with other documents that describe the same events (to determine

	its veracity) and with anything the author may have said or written on other occasions (to determine its sincerity).
Act-value.	Autobiography is a personal performance, an action that exemplifies the character of the agent responsible for that action and how it is performed.
Identity-value.	In autobiography, the logically distinct roles of author, narrator, and protagonist are conjoined, with the same individual occupying a position both in the context, the associated "scene of writing," and within the text itself.[4]

The correlation of text to situation seems obvious enough, but it might seem far more contrived were we not already so familiar with the contextual implications that regularly accompany all our uses of language.[5] As initiates to language as an institution, we are already accustomed to the power of words to express propositions, assert truths, imply beliefs, and encode subtle changes in the contexts that surround the production and the reception of sentences. Above all else, we do not find it remarkable to expect that for every utterance there must be a speaking subject, one and only one authorizing source who is responsible for what is said and done. Autobiography simply exploits more general conventions that apply to language as a whole, especially the established structure of participation that defines the relevant roles of those who use language, isolating certain key positions (for example, speaker, listener) and stipulating the powers that they putatively possess. Equally important for autobiography is the fact that language practice commonly allows the same individual who plays the role of speaker to serve as his own referent as well. The English pronoun "I" is the extreme example of this practice, simultaneously *indicating* the subject of the act of speaking and *designating* the subject of the sentence that is spoken. In this way "I" becomes both the potential bearer of qual-

---

[4] This version of my earlier work in *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore, 1976), pp. 9-18, has been revised to stress that "action," "actor," and "identity" are defined by the rules of speaking and rely on such conventions for their existence.

[5] Cf. J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (New York, 1968) and J. R. Searle's extension of that work in *Speech Acts* (Cambridge, 1969).

ities and the agent of actions that go beyond the immediate act of speaking, making the otherwise spectral and barely differentiated speaking subject into a more palpable and powerful figure.[6]

Thus the structure of autobiography, a story that is at once by and about the same individual, echoes and reinforces a structure already implicit in our language, a structure that is also (not accidentally) very like what we usually take to be the structure of self-consciousness itself: the capacity to know and simultaneously be that which one knows. Like the speaking subject, the classical epistemic subject is both the site or source of consciousness and the subject matter of its own reflections. Indeed to be a "self" at all seems to demand that one display the ability to embrace, take in, one's own attributes and activities—which is just the sort of display that language makes possible. This fundamental identification (or conflation) of two subjects—the speaking subject and the subject of the sentence—is, then, crucial to the autobiographical project, to the unity of observer and observed, the purported continuity of past and present, life and writing.[7]

Just how delicate this balance is becomes apparent when one turns from language to film, where the organizing assumptions are no longer the same. Film upsets each of the parameters—"truth-value," "act-value," and "identity-value"—that we commonly associate with the autobiographical act to such an extent that even deliberate attempts to re-create the genre in cinematic terms are subtly subverted. As a result, the autobiographical self begins to seem less like an independent being and more like an abstract "position" that appears when a number of key conventions converge—and vanishes when those conventional supports are removed.

"Truth-value" would seem to present the least difficulty for film, but even this is not quite what it was in language. Images lack the articulation and, hence, the selectivity of sentences; they do not distinguish between subjects and predicates in a way that allows us to

---

[6] Maureen O'Meara, "From Linguistics to Literature: The Un-time-liness of Tense," *Diacritics*, (Summer 1976), p. 68, has further words on this topic with respect to fiction in particular.

[7] The charge of conflation is Lacan's, for whom there is always a "disjunction of the *sujet de l'énoncé* and the *sujet de l'énonciation*. . . . The 'I' cannot lie on both planes at once," and hence "the simple identity of the subject" is a "constitutive impossibility." See Ben Brewster et al., "Comment on Julia Lesage, 'The Human Subject—You, He, or Me?'," *Screen* 16, no. 2 (1975): 83-90, and Jeffrey Mehlman's full-length study of French autobiographies from this perspective, *A Structural Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss* (Ithaca, 1974).

discriminate between the essential and the accidental. Are we meant to notice the gun in the felon's hand or the felon who is holding the gun? For would-be autobiographers this means the possibility of misplaced emphases and misunderstood claims. Does the figure on the screen look like the artist as a young man or only behave like him? Granted, because of the sequencing and editing of images in film there is greater opportunity for control, but the dream of capturing on film the world in all its density and contingency is equally compelling. Even the possibility of using language—an accompanying voice—to direct attention to certain aspects of a shot must be weighed against the possibility of recording human sounds that are more elusive, such as the inarticulate or polyphonic tonalities in the sound track of an Altman film. To re-create the more selective truth of the autobiographical text might, then, appear to diminish the truthfulness that is peculiarly cinematic.

Over the years, film has managed to establish its own generic distinction between fiction and fact. But the situation is complicated by a further subdivision of "truth-telling" films into those that are unstaged, "documentary" recordings of actual events and those that are openly staged representations of actual events (with "staging" here embracing not only script and artificial *mise en scène* but postproduction optical effects as well). In the first case, we read the film as a mechanical imprint, its truth depending on the accuracy, completeness, and purity of that imprint in addition to its freedom from contamination or human interference. In the second case, we judge the film as a depiction rather than as evidence, and we assess its truthfulness according to canons of resemblance.[8] Film therefore introduces a new variable that autobiographers have not heretofore had to contend with—the choice between staging "the truth" or recording it directly. Language, of course, offers no way of recording without also staging—a diary is no more a direct transcription, in this sense, than the memoirs of a septuagenarian. Thus, although the truth of both documentaries and staged reenactments depends on conventional assumptions (whether about photographic processes or about resemblance), the need to choose remains. It seems almost inevitable that the choice of staging over recording will suggest a greater need for intervention or even provoke suspicions that the autobiographer "has something to hide."

[8] Umberto Eco, "On the Contribution of Film to Semiotics," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 2, no. 1 (1977): 1-14.

Moreover veracity is only part of the "truth-value" we expect from autobiography, the other being its purported "sincerity." But under what conditions would we call a film sincere or say that it expresses a belief in, a commitment to, the images it presents—the very wording sounds bizarre. There are cases, to be sure, where a voice-over accompanying an image casts doubt on the status of that image, but without such accompaniment nothing in the shot itself—not even gross distortion or sudden loss of focus—could identify it unambiguously as an expression of doubt. Shots may differ in their pacing, composition, lighting, focus, and so forth, but these differences have no fixed significance, as is apparent from the way the meaning of slow motion changes from film to film according to the context in which it appears. There is no way of filming that conventionally counts as wishing or grieving in the same manner as ways of speaking count as the ritual expression of grief, or belief, or need—yet another barrier to the self-expression autobiography traditionally requires.

We read attitudes and judgments in prose because we accept language as a mode of action, by definition an attempt to effect some end and therefore presupposing (if only by the same definition) an agent with certain abilities and psychological capacities. But our sense of film as a mode of action is relatively weak; we have only a few vague notions of what films "do" beyond such broad categories as "report," "entertain," and "advertise." In fact, many film theorists have claimed that what is most characteristic about film is precisely its power to constrain human agency, to limit selectivity, temper will, and blunt authority. In André Bazin's famous words: "For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a non-living agent. For the first time, an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man."[9] This is "the myth of total cinema," the effortless magic of something that happens of its own accord. But the automatic undoes the autobiographic; we no longer need to infer the presence of a human agent, nor by the same token can filmmakers entirely control what will be filmed. Thus ends the hope of either discovering or demonstrating personal capacities in the act of filming.

[9] "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, 1967), p. 13. Cf. also McConnell, *The Spoken Seen*; Alan Spiegel, *Fiction and the Camera Eye* (Charlottesville, 1976); and Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (New York, 1971).

Film disrupts the "act–value" necessary for autobiography in other ways as well. Where the rules of language designate a single source, film has instead a disparate group of distinct roles and separate stages of production. Even if a single individual should manage to be scriptwriter and director, cameraman, set designer, light and sound technician, and editor to boot (and few "auteurs" in fact manage to do them all), the result would be a tour de force and not the old, unquestionable integrity of the speaking subject. An auteur is never quite the same thing as an "author" because of the changes film effects in the nature of authority itself. Authors must exercise their own capacities where auteurs are free to delegate; authors actually possess the abilities that auteurs need only oversee, and they fabricate what filmmakers may only need to find. This indirection and multiplicity, the fact that we cannot confidently treat everything in a film as the product of a single source or expect the same intimate involvement of the maker in the texture of what is finally made, leads to autobiographical paradox. In a film like *The Rose*, for example, the protagonist (whom we see actually giving birth) is partly responsible for making the film as well: she works as the sound technician, while her husband acts as the director of the film. Since autobiography is predicated on sole authorship, the classical definitions no longer seem to fit. Indeed, it is hard to know what to call such an effort, especially if we continue to accept the traditional division between self and other, and remain convinced that one and only one person can have authentic knowledge of that self (and, in turn, that my own self is the only self I can ever really know). It was paradox like this that two decades ago led Merleau-Ponty to declare that film confronts us with the need for a new epistemology and a renovated psychology:

> We must reject the prejudice which makes "inner realities" out of love, hate, or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. . . . They [films] directly present to us that special way of being in the world, of dealing with things and other people, which we can see in the sign language of gestures and gaze and which clearly defines each person we know.[10]

Not every commentator is so sanguine, however, and many find in film not a new psychology but the end of psychology, a "dehu-

[10] "The Film and the New Psychology," *Sense and Non-sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, 1964), pp. 52, 58.

manized . . . depthless treatment . . . [that] not only distances seer and reader from the character but usually makes this character impervious to further inspection."[11] Whichever conclusion one draws, it is clear that film is—from the vantage point of the old, language based psychology—more or less "impersonal." 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. This is not a deficiency in the medium but the consequence of longstanding practices of representational realism, which allow no distinctive position for the "I" of the depictor as opposed to the "You" of the spectator—the realistic illusion thus depending on conflating these points of view and making them appear identical. Moreover, representation requires that the vantage point be situated "out of frame," rendered as unobtrusive as possible, a necessary blind spot that might otherwise destroy the seeming self-sufficiency of the view.[12] To the extent that the filmmaker accepts the conventions of pictorial realism (and it is these conventions that underlie the "truth-value" of film), he must avoid unusual or unexpected points of observation that might not be immediately accessible to the "average viewer"—avoid anything, in fact, that betrays the work of filming and indicates that it exceeds the mere passive reception of images (or sounds). Bazin's innocent formula—"between the *originating* object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a non-living agent"—gives it all away. The epistemology of representation that film adopts and extends to its logical limit is the epistemology of spectatorship—the object originates what the perceiving subject only absorbs and thereafter tries to copy. The camera perfects this process by making the copying automatic—free from the fallibility of human inattention, beyond the distorting intervention of human artifice that cannot compete with the original and, since it involves effort, challenges the impression that the perceiver merely *re*produces what the object itself produces.

Of course, there are films that flaunt their "infidelity" through the opulence of their staging and cinematic effects, repudiating the conventional passivity of representation. Yet so powerful is the myth of total cinema, the ideal of automatic reproduction, that to be distinctive a filmmaker must be exceptional, a violator of norms. We assume that each text has its author, but we credit the

[11] Spiegel, *Fiction and the Camera Eye*, p. 146.
[12] Jean-Louis Comolli, "Le passé filmé," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 277 (1977): 13.

existence of an auteur only when there is something odd, exceptional, idiosyncratic in the composition—for much the same reason that the so-called "subjective shots" in film (which send us scurrying in search of a particular sensibility to whom we can attribute them) are those that are blurred, or slowed, or oddly angled.[13] If cinema is "personal" only when it is somehow "private" or "abnormal," only when something disrupts the representational illusion and prevents the audience from automatically assuming the spectator's position, then it is clear why film has so much difficulty in re-creating the balance autobiography requires. For the autobiographical act must be at once expressive and descriptive; the two are not mutually exclusive in language where truth is acknowledged to be a construction (an assertion that the speaker makes) rather than a reflection. Thus we do not immediately assume that statements delivered *in propria persona* must be distorted or vague or unverifiable, whereas in film expressive and descriptive shots seem almost mutually exclusive. It is surreal and stylized cinema like Cocteau's *Testament* that is called "personal." But if so, then the more a film succeeds as an expression of the autobiographer's personal vision, the less it can claim to be an undistorted record or representation of that person.

Moreover, even at their most extreme, it is doubtful that the effects of shooting, editing, and staging are capable of expressing what we conventionally call "personality" to the degree that language can. The "subjective camera" can exploit proximity, angle, focus, and mobility to make its presence felt, but these are poor substitutes for the array of modal qualifiers and performatives that define the speaker's subjective position vis à vis his subject matter. What students of literature usually refer to as "point of view" is rarely limited to geometry or strictly visual information. Indeed Mieke Bal has recently proposed a separate category, a "focalizer" as distinct from the "narrator," to make the different qualities of these vantage points more clear.[14] The need for such a category is especially apparent in assessing those films that attempt to re-create a first-person narrator, such as the notorious *The Lady in the Lake*. The film adopted the hero's point of view quite literally—director-star Robert Montgomery wearing a camera strapped to his chest

[13] According to Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," *Screen* 16, no. 2 (1975): 56, "The uncommon angle makes us more aware of what we had merely forgotten. . . . The ordinary framings are finally felt to be non-framings."
[14] Mieke Bal, "Narration et focalisation," *Poétique* 29 (1977): 107-127.

throughout the filming—but the effect was not at all what he had hoped. As George Wilson describes it:

> The movie gives one the impression that there is a camera by the name of "Philip Marlowe" stumbling around Los Angeles passing itself off as the well-known human being of the same name. We do not (cannot?) naturally see the moving camera as corresponding to a continuous re-orientation in space of the visual field, and . . . we don't see a cut, even within a scene, as representing a shift in a person's visual attention. . . . There may be a sense in which film delivers a series of views of a world, but it is only in restricted circumstances that these will be *someone's views*.[15]

Given the cinematic conventions outlined above, we are not likely to seek a "focalizer" for what appears on the screen (that is, ascribe it to a particular observer) unless there are exceptional reasons for doing so. And even when we do, there is little in the shot itself to characterize the focalizer; usually we must refer to prior events and images to tell who is viewing and the motive and manner of his view.[16] Since the powers of the perceiving subject are fewer and weaker than those of the speaking subject, the first-person focalizer lacks the distinctive attributes and behavior that we expect of the autobiographical first-person, even when we are aware of some intervening presence.

Another and final factor that makes the cinematic subject seem so much more shadowy than the speaking subject is the total absence of "identity-value" in film. In speaking "I" merge easily, almost inextricably, with another "I" whose character and adventures I am claiming as my own. But the spectator in film is always out of frame, creating an impassible barrier between the person seeing and the person seen. To merge them into a single figure would be equivalent to admitting the possibility of being in two places at the same time—a clear violation of governing geometric and optical codes. The trick comes off in language where the position of the speaker is already marked and the "frame" of the speech act offi-

[15] "Film, Perception, and Point of View," *Modern Language Notes* 91, no. 5 (1976): 1042. See also Metz's treatment of the subject camera in "Current Problems of Film Theory," *Screen* 14, nos. 1 and 2 (1973): 47, 69.
[16] See Edward Branigan, "Formal Presentation of the Point of View Shot," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 54-64, and Nick Browne, "The Spectator-in-the-Text," *Film Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1975-1976): 26-44.

cially recognized. More important is the fact that the mode of existence that the speaker putatively shares with the figure he speaks about need not be temporal or spatial. Language tolerates more difference in identity and affords more grounds for saying that separate instances are "the same"—perhaps the only grounds in some cases, such as the case of the otherwise impalpable, unobservable but not unspeakable sense of a persisting "self."

The impersonality of the cinematic eye, its lack of density and individuation, its relative passivity and the eternal separation of the seer from the seen—all these create the impression of a subjectivity that is "too pure" for autobiography. As Christian Metz explains:

> The perceived is entirely on the side of the object, and there is no longer any equivalent of the own image, of that unique mix of perceived and subject (of other and I). . . . it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him. I take no part in the perceived, on the contrary, I am the *all-perceiving*. . . . the spectator . . . [is] a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness): as condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject, anterior to every *there is*.[17]

The perceiver can never hope to catch a glimpse of himself; the figure that he sees before him on the screen cannot be his own, for he is somewhere else watching it. Like frames around a picture, screens are simply the concrete manifestation of a barrier between the site of the perceptual stimulus and the site of the response; their presence underscores the cinematic lesson that objectivity ends where subjectivity begins. Language has no such absolute dichotomy—neither uncontaminated objectivity nor pure subjectivity. In reading autobiography, we accept this from the start and know that we will get no more than a description filtered through the speaker's subjectivity. But film makes us impatient for a direct transcription—an actual imprint of the person, unmediated and "uncreated." Yet at the same time, it ironically forbids that the same person can be both the figure on the screen and the one whose consciousness is registering that figure.

There are still cases, to be sure, where a single auteur is recognized as the creator of the film and yet appears "in person" in the film. This would preserve the proprieties of classical autobiog-

[17] Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," pp. 49-51.

raphy, were it not for a latent inconsistency. We are usually willing to allow that someone could first plan a shot and then edit the results, but when that same person passes into view, purporting to give his whole person over to "the side of the object," there comes a flash of vertigo, an eerie instant when "no one is in charge" and we sense that a rootless, inhuman power of vision is wandering the world—"les trajets d'un regard sans nom, sans personne."[18] At this juncture as at perhaps no other all our traditional verbal humanism temporarily breaks down and we are forced to acknowledge that this cinematic subjectivity belongs, properly, to no one: "Personnages, acteurs, spectateurs, opérateur et réalisateur y sont impliqués, de diverses façons, mais ce n'est proprement celui d'aucun: il manque à chacun."[19]

It should now come as no surprise that turning to particular films we find a tendency for them to fall into two opposing groups—those that stress the person filmed and those that stress the person filming—replicating the split between the "all-perceived" and the "all-perceiving." The problem for the first group of films, as I suggested at the outset, is how to indicate that the life we see is an act of self-perception, an autobiography and not just a biography. For the second group, the problem is how to make the film express the personality of a particular perceiver without at the same time allowing it to collapse in the opposite direction, into abstract expressionism, fantasy, or surrealism. A look at individual experiments will illustrate how great the dilemmas faced by aspiring cinematic autobiographers actually are.

First come those films where autobiography almost merges with biography or even realistic fiction: Gordon Park's *The Learning Tree*, for example, or Nadine Marquand Trintignant's *Ça n'arrive qu'aux autres*. Neither of these staged productions with their professional casts and their polished but "unmarked" style would immediately strike us as personal reminiscence. It is only after we have learned in some other way that the events the films depict are very like events in the lives of the directors themselves that we begin to speak of autobiography. More than the absence of marked eccentricities of style, however, it is the way these films adhere to the

[18] P. Bonitzer, "Les deux regards," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 275 (1977): 41.

[19] "Characters, actors, spectators, cameraman, and director are in various ways involved in it, but it doesn't properly belong to any one of them: each somehow falls short" (ibid.).

so-called "tutor code of classical cinema" that makes them so difficult to recognize as personal accounts.[20] This "sutured" cinema, with its seamless and always logical transitions, its camera work and editing scrupulously subordinate to the progression of the plot, deliberately effaces the act of observation and makes the story seem to tell itself. Far from presenting self-images, then, such cinematic practices seem designed to disown images, to make the audience forget the camera and even their own intrusive glance.

But it is equally possible that a more marked style, where open framing and rhythm no longer conceal the work of the camera and the editor, will still fail to communicate that a film is autobiographical. Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* is proof of this, although Truffaut also took certain steps of his own to "estrange" his represented self behind another name and allowed the already ambiguous figure of "Antoine Doinel" to stray even further from his own life in succeeding films. (Thus, though Jean-Pierre Léaud literally grew up in the role of Doinel, he has ultimately come to represent not Truffaut but the spirit of the *Nouvelle Vague*, making allusive appearances as such in films by Godard and Bertolucci.) One could, of course, learn a great deal about how an autobiographer sees or wishes to see himself from the actor he chooses to embody his self-image— provided that one can be sure about the generic status of the film and certain too of *whose* autobiography it is and how much control he had over the casting. None of these doubts attend us when we read autobiographies, nor do writers have to contend with "self-images" who have life histories of their own, who age and reappear in different roles, and even add their own, independent interpretation to the self they body forth. Then too, the rules of similitude being what they are, we can never know precisely the degree or kind of resemblance we are asked to see—does it extend to Léaud's physique, his particular physiognomy, his very gestures and tone of voice? A writer who ventures into self-description can be far more discriminating and many autobiographers never refer to their physical appearance at all. Unlike the cinematic eye that becomes diffuse and indistinct without an accompanying image, the "I" of prose can act, think, and even love without it. Indeed to dwell on one's own appearance in a book has a ludicrous effect, a hint of nar-

[20] Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1974).

cissism, even if it is the body-image (as the French suggest) to which we owe our first presentiment of an integrated ego.[21]

No matter how much attention the camera lavishes on Léaud it is not this in itself that brings *The 400 Blows* so close to autobiography but the fact that Antoine Doinel functions as a focalizer as well as a focus. Doinel is, in fact, the only figure whose glances the camera regularly follows, to the extent of occasionally imitating the low-angle perspective of a child. Much of the pathos of the film derives from this, the demonstrated inability of others, particularly adults, to see what and how the child sees, and his own inability to communicate his perceptions in a language they will understand. Yet as the famous freeze-frame that concludes the film makes clear, Doinel is ultimately more seen than seeing, caught within a power of vision that cannot be his own, that even robs him in the end of his power of movement. He is left standing inert before a transfixed gaze that struggles to preserve him from his fate, preferring to embalm him rather than allow something to befall him that the gazer evidently cannot bear to watch. We could ascribe this euthanasiac glance to Truffaut himself were we not already so deeply implicated in it, experiencing it as the projection of our own troubled regard for the child. Our interest in the ending of *The 400 Blows* is not a product of our curiosity about Truffaut's idiosyncratic perspective or his private attachment to the child that he once was. It is because the film's autobiographic claims are so tenuous that we feel free to claim as our own the position of the perceiving subject.

Another group of films replace the focalizer with a narrator—a disembodied voice—rather than the image of a character to accompany the shots as they unfold. The result approximates first-person narration far more closely, making what we see someone's vision of the world and at the same time filtering it through all those parameters peculiar to language—tense, modality, mood—that give an otherwise neutral image the quality of a memory, a supposition, an expression of desire. But interestingly, we are not willing to call a film autobiographical on the basis of the narrating voice alone. In *Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman*, we hear the protagonist's voice describing scenes from her own past, yet the fact that she did not control the shooting or the editing of these scenes makes them part

[21] Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore, 1976), develops the work of Freud and Lacan on the introjection of the ego (pp. 80-84).

of a documentary life, an unstaged portrait but not a self-portrait. There are also films where the voice does belong to a member of the crew, as in *Phantom India* where Louis Malle's own commentary penetrates the exotic footage until India, like Levi-Strauss's sad tropics, seems almost to become the phantasm of the explorer's mind. It is tempting to construe this commentary as somehow responsible for what we see, but logically we know this cannot be the case. What we hear issues from within the film, just another part of the cinematic record. As with the camera, so too with the microphone; the voice comes to us automatically with no way of knowing who transcribed it and no necessary link between the one who speaks and the one who then records. Thus there still remains the stubborn impersonality of the machinery itself and a process of recording whose presumed fidelity depends on that impersonality.

The same misgivings must attend those more ambitious efforts to put the autobiographer himself on film, to place him bodily before the camera and record his every word and mannerism. These may range from staged reenactments to *cinéma verité* and involve various levels and kinds of collaboration. In *Chapaqua*, the writer, Conrad Rooks, also stars in the evocation of his own drug addiction and subsequent withdrawal, but the direction is by another hand; in *Joyce at 34*, the protagonist is the codirector of a film that evolves without a prior script. An especially interesting example of the perplexities autobiographical film can provoke is Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks*. Anger writes, directs, and plays the principal role in a story set in his own home and concerned with his own confessed homosexuality. Yet the particular events the film depicts are entirely fictitious, albeit therapeutic—"imaginary displays offer temporary relief," as a headnote to the film explains. The encounter with an ideal lover never really happened, and many of the film's striking optical effects (a Roman candle bursting from an open fly, to take one familiar image) are blatantly staged. The mixture of real bodies and artificial members, actual settings and imaginary events, literal desires with figurative fulfillments is dizzying and badly skews our usual assumptions about the self-evidence of visual information and the coherence of the visible person. In writing, the appearance, character, and identity of the person are normally indivisible, if not completely isomorphic. Even in theater, the dichotomy of appearance and character as opposed to actual identity is still relatively clear. But film separates them all, giving us actual ("unretouched") appearances in the role of unreal

characters—the distinctive "individuality" of a star apart from his individual identity.[22] Hence the complexity of *Fireworks*, a film in which Anger actually appears but not in his own character, where he impersonates his own person accomplishing what he himself cannot.

If there is a single filmmaker whose work best summarizes the problematic character of autobiographical film, it is Federico Fellini. Few commercial directors have been more persistently autobiographical and none more resourceful in trying to translate the classical formula into cinematic terms. On closer inspection, however, one sees not uniformity but a series of shifting approximations that alternate (as one might expect) between an investment in the person before the camera and the personal qualities of the filming itself. Fellini's oeuvre thus could almost serve as an anthology of all the different strategies an aspiring autobiography might employ. There is the staged reminiscence and the dramatized self of *Amarcord*, the first-person focalizer of *8 1/2*, the unseen narrator at the opening of *The Clowns*, and the personal appearances of the director himself later in the same film, as well as in *Roma* and the *Director's Notebook*. In addition, there are those extravagant "signed creations"—*Fellini-Satyricon* and *Fellini-Casanova*—where we witness the imperial staging of personal fantasies against the background of already established works, the better to display the workings of his own imagination. Apparently the constraints of autobiographical truth are too great to permit the fullest exhibition of Fellini's subjectivity; the recollections in *Amarcord* are filmed with far less of the personal whim one finds in *Casanova*, and the films where Fellini appears "in person" are always those where the shooting and montage are most "realistic." Fellini's own assessment of the generic status of his work is equally inconsistent—"I am my own still-life."/"I am a film."/"Everything and nothing in my work is autobiographical."[23]

This indecisiveness is half playful and half a response to some permanent ambiguities in autobiographical film itself. Typical of this are the arguments over whether *8 1/2* should be taken as an autobiography or not. It is not that the film fails to render "inner life" convincingly or falls hopelessly short of the first-person narration necessary for autobiography. Indeed it is a triumph of sustained

[22] See Cavell's discussion in *The World Viewed*, pp. 36–37.

[23] *Fellini on Fellini*, ed. Anna Keel and Christian Stritch, trans. Isabel Quigley (New York, 1976), Preface.

focalization and proof of the depths that it can achieve. It is instructive to compare its famous silent opening in a dream *ex nihilo* with the more literal minded use of the subjective camera in *Lady in the Lake*. Why does the opening of *8 1/2* immediately compel us to see it as "someone's view," when we have as yet to encounter an eligible viewer? In part it is simply its obscurity, the disorientation we feel in the absence of an establishing shot to tell us where these cars are going or why the traffic has stalled, the nervous motion of the camera itself, the milk and murk of the lighting, the exaggerated pettiness of the occupants of the other cars surrounding the focal car, and, of course, the ultimate violation of the laws of gravity when the figure in the focal car ascends and flies from the tunnel. We are plunged into a mystery and reach out for an explanation—as we would not if the scene maintained the decorums of cinematic realism: stable camera, lighting wholly subservient to the demands of recognition, clearly delineated planes of foreground and background that correspond to the logic of the narrative.[24] To restore our own equilibrium we must reduce the sequence to a dream and then seek out the dreamer whose subjective distortions are responsible for what we see.

An additional clue to the mediated nature of the opening is the odd way the figure in the focal car is filmed. This we quickly grasp must be the embodiment, the self-image, of the dreamer himself, a focalizer whom we both do and do not see, since the camera will not confront him directly, face to face. Thus there is a margin of invisibility reserved—a blind spot that remains irrevocably on the side of the viewer and cannot enter the field of vision. This is perhaps as close as the "eye" of filming can ever come to the "I" of writing, a "shifter" (as Jespersen called the personal pronouns) that is seemingly both inside and outside the frame at once, both the subject and the object of perception. The film preserves this facelessness until Guido is fully awake and stands before his bathroom mirror, where the vague silhouette and the jumble of limbs that we have previously seen at last compose themselves into an integrated reflection, and Guido's own anxious gaze sees in the glass the coherent image of a middle-aged man. The reenactment of the *stade du miroir* is brilliant but inconclusive insofar as settling the question of whether the film is truly autobiographical. It is Guido,

24 Raymond Williams, "A Lecture on Realism," *Screen* 18, no. 1 (1977): 61-74.

after all, and not Fellini whose face emerges in the mirror, and it is as much our gaze as Fellini's own that watches this take place.

Guido may well be a director of Fellini's age and very much in Fellini's mold, his childhood memories and his adult crises may overlap at every point with Fellini's own, and his ninth (unmade) film may even coincide with Fellini's ninth success so perfectly that the resulting film is somewhere in between, a teasing eight and one-half. The resemblance may be remarkable, but resemblance in itself is not enough. It will never add up to autobiographical identity (which is what makes it resemblance in the first place) nor establish beyond contention that Guido is Fellini's own image. No matter how narrow it becomes, the gap between the person filming and the person filmed remains.

Why should the organizing assumptions be so different in language and in film? Why should self-reference and even selfhood be so ingrained in one set of practices and not the other? The origins of language and even writing are too remote to do more than speculate, but the rise of film is relatively recent. Here one can say something about the conditions that surround the emergence of a signifying practice and about how that practice, in turn, becomes intelligible—"thinkable" and "experienciable"—for those who use it. By examining the ideological milieu and historical moment that gave rise to film, we can better understand why it should be so resistant to autobiography.

The first sustained impetus for film came from the natural sciences (although there were also certain toys—projection devices and instruments to make still images appear to move—that also anticipated film, and the potential for using film to produce sheer spectacle and optical illusions rather than more accurate visual records was quickly recognized). As scientific documents, films were closely associated with contemporary positivist assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the most reliable evidence, and the most valid methods of proof. The only good evidence was "objective"—that is, independent of any particular observer. Whatever could not be reproduced at another time, in another place, for another observer was untestable and therefore either suspect or irrelevant. The "subjective" side of knowledge was confined to widely shared responses, hence to those perceptual judgments that unlike value judgments or emotional reactions no one would be in-

clined to dispute. Ideally, the perceiving subjects were therefore interchangeable.

At its most extreme, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (coinciding with the rise of cinema), this was a science that rejected theory and put all its faith in methodology, impatient to reduce discovery to a system and limiting the role of the "discoverer" as far as possible to a series of prescribed, repetitive motions. Later scientific (and cinematic) practices have no doubt called much of this program into question, particularly its faith in unmediated observation. In retrospect, the strictures of positivism may even seem defensive, a response to growing uncertainties about what was "real" or knowable or subject to human control. None of these uncertainties needed to be confronted if the area of inquiry were sufficiently circumscribed. The greater the power of the discoverer, the less the apparent power and autonomy of the evidence. The implicit fear, as Stanley Cavell names it, is that "ours is an age in which our philosophical grasp of the world fails to reach beyond our taking and holding views of it."

> How do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen. This is not a wish for power over creation (as Pygmalion's was), but a wish not to need power. . . . It is as though the world's projection explains our forms of unknownness and of our inability to know.[25]

Hence the prestige of perceptual evidence and the erosion of autobiography. "Seeing is believing" because of what it is not: it is not an exertion that requires singular powers or a fabrication of something that might not otherwise exist—in a word, it is not an action some particular agent must perform but an event that simply happens to anyone who occupies a specified position. All of this has been built into film, incorporated in its machinery and in the role it assigns to the spectator. In the words of George Wilson, "film technique presupposes quite definite assumptions about the audience's perceptual relationship to the natural significance of phenomena."[26]

But perhaps the change in consciousness is less drastic than it seems. It is a very small step from the private autobiographical self,

[25] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, pp. xiii, 40-41.
[26] Wilson, "Film, Perception, and Point of View," p. 1028.

inaccessible to public scrutiny, to the anonymous public person, interchangeable with any other.[27] Both heir and enemy of autobiography, the signifying practices of film have contradictory implications. On the one hand, they simply expose certain tendencies already implicit in writing. In the words of Derrida:

> We are witnessing not an end of writing that would restore, in accord with McLuhan's ideological representation, a transparency or an immediacy to social relations; but rather an increasingly powerful historical expansion of general writing. . . . To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten. . . . Cut off from all absolute responsibility, from consciousness as the ultimate authority . . . the intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself.[28]

Writing may be figuratively a machine, a "speech" that continues to operate in the absence of any speaking subject, but the machinery of film is literal and unavoidable. Thus one potential effect of film is to "deconstruct" the autobiographical preoccupation with capturing the self on paper, demonstrating the delusion of a subjectivity trying to be "through and through present to itself" in the very writing that is the mark of its own absence. The ideal of self-possession—the reifying desire for mastery over an essential self—might then give way to both an identity that could not be possessed and a more playful and disenchanted autobiographical quest.

But if film does dismantle certain key effects of language (such as self-consciousness) and reveal their dependence on a particular set of semiotic conventions, it surely has its own conventional effects and its own characteristic blind spots as well. The absence of any particular "source" that is responsible for what we see becomes

[27] "In viewing films, the sense of invisibility is an expression of modern privacy or anonymity. . . .Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. We do not so much look at the world as look *out at* it, from behind the self." See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, pp. 40 and 102. The connection to economic and social history and especially to the place of the individual in advanced bourgeois societies where certain sentiments are confined to private life and isolated from the values of the public marketplace is obvious enough.
[28] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Glyph* 1 (1977): 180-181, 194-195.

confused with the total absence of intervention or control: thus, the myths of total cinema, of "positive" knowledge purged of all impurities of human will and imagination, of an Edenic eye. The exaggerated claims once made for individual genius then give way to equally exaggerated claims for (and hence fears of) impersonal technology—machines that not only operate automatically but actually control their operators. In place of the old imperial author (when no special effort is made to maintain that position for the auteur) there emerges a system of concealed authority, a denial of responsibility, a helplessness made legitimate for filmmaker and spectator alike. Surely this powerless cinematic subject is no less chimerical than either the speaking subject or a fixed belief that passive spectatorship is the inevitable form of consciousness no less "ideological" than an uncritical acceptance of the masterful cogito.[29]

Thus while it is clear that film must effect some changes in our familiar notions of personal identity, selfhood, and individuality, it is less clear what direction these changes will ultimately take or how consistent they will be. In the absence of an authoritative self, what will film make of personal identity? It could reduce it to a type, a set of distinctive mannerisms and nothing more,[30] but it could also lay bare a more radical mystery beyond the limits of self-awareness. There are no doubt films that simplify and submerge the individual in the collective, but there are also those like Anger's *Fireworks* that unearth a delicate polyphony within the apparent unity of a single existence. When cinematic autobiographers join with others in a collaborative "self-study" or simply submit themselves to the camera, they acknowledge that they are no longer "lords and owners of their faces." And how they manage this confrontation—whether they deliberately exhibit themselves or only await the alien gaze—is as rich an illustration of their personal idiosyncrasies as most written confessions and apologies provide. Such films cannot produce the old self-knowledge (nor the old self-deceptions) of classical autobiography, but they can do

[29] See Coward's "Class, 'Culture,' and the Social Formation" for a more extended discussion of the relationship between the "mechanist" and the "idealist" subjects of empiricism (pp. 75-79).

[30] A number of writers treat the tendency of film to "typify" rather than "individualize" characters: Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York, 1969); McConnell, *The Spoken Seen*, Chapter 6, passim; and Cavell, *The World Viewed*, Chapters 4 and 5, passim.

something else: they can take identity beyond what one consciousness can grasp, beyond even what the unaided human consciousness can encompass. "The camera," in Benjamin's well-known formulation, "introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses."[31] Filmed, the unowned image of the body becomes a locus of identity rather than its mask, an expression of personality rather than an encumbrance. Nor is this image of the body the same crude, undifferentiated whole of the *stade du miroir*, but a new, articulate assemblage, a fresh construction of elements never before juxtaposed where voice may stray away from body, the whole diffuse and fuse again into yet other configurations.

In the process of revealing how precarious these perceived configurations are, however, film also challenges the presumed integrity of the perceiving subject. For the eye of cinema is itself a composition made up of the separate elements of staging, lighting, recording, and editing; it is subjectivity released from the ostensible temporal and spatial integrity of the speaking subject. Such freedom, multiplicity, and mobility could not occur without mechanical assistance. The cinematic subject cannot, then, precede the cinematic apparatus, meaning that even the most "personal" film is logically the product of a person whom the film itself creates. Fellini's paradox—"I have invented myself entirely: a childhood, a personality, longings, dreams, and memories, all in order to enable me to tell them"—begins to sound less extreme.[32] In fact, it is not extreme enough, for the "teller" is also an invention.

No doubt this was also the case with those earlier instruments of consciousness, speech and writing; contemporary autobiography in particular (Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* or Barthes' *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*) often takes as both its burden and its liberation the power of the autobiographical text to extend and utterly transform the person of its author. But the heterogeneity of the edited image goes even further toward expressing a manufactured subjectivity, an artifact that has no single site, no inherent unity, no body where it is "naturally" confined. Thus the assertion that "the world seen cinematically is the world seen without a self" actually has a double meaning. It could mean either a new way of experiencing ourselves or an exacerbation of the worst tendencies in the old modes of

[31] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p. 237.
[32] Keel and Stritch, eds., *Fellini on Fellini*, p. 51.

perception—the Cartesian split made absolute at last, leaving only reified appearances, a "world" devoid of human agency, on one side, and a disembodied power of vision, all transcendental voyeurism, on the other. "A world complete without me." According to Cavell, "this is an importance of film—and a danger. It takes my life as my haunting of the world."[33]

But to say this is to treat film as a metaphysical essence rather than as a set of signifying practices—an institution capable of bearing those meanings that Cavell (and not Cavell alone) finds in it but capable as well of bearing other meanings according to the uses that filmmakers and financiers, audiences and critics ultimately make of it. In this respect, film simply shares—or better, articulates—the dilemmas of an entire culture now irrevocably committed to complex technologies and intricate social interdependencies. To make the meanings of film human without falling back on an outworn humanism, to achieve more fluid modes of collaboration and diversity rather than standardized expression, to establish practices in which "I" may no longer exist in the same way but nonetheless cannot escape my own participation—these concerns are not unique to film but among the most fundamental problems that confront "the age of mechanical reproduction" as a whole.

One thing is therefore certain: if film is gradually displacing other modes of communication, it is no alien invasion. The popularity of film and video could only come about because the way they position us in relation to each other and to our common world is somehow familiar to us, closer to the way we live than the linguistic and literary practices they supplant—autobiography, in particular. They must make sense of us or we could never make sense of them.

---

[33] *The World Viewed*, p. 160. It may be the fact that Cavell retains traditional notions of the self that makes him see film as "a world complete without me."