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# Thresholds of Invisibility: A Perspective on Moments of Transition in Scholarly Rhetorics

## Abstract

This dissertation suggests that certain historical moments of transition generate identifiable schisms in scholarly discourse that leave contemporary scholars unable to communicate with one another. At these moments of Augustinian "unlikeness," established scholarly commitments, such as logocentrism, are rendered invisible to the critics that rely on them as new forms and technologies become the (ostensible) talking points of discourse. The confusion at these moments contribute to a complex of discursive practices that can be called "thresholds of invisibility," or moments of transition and division, when scholars are captivated by new forms and less attentive to the continuing influence of already established terministic screens. In the process, however, these normally submerged screens rise to the terministic surface, allowing for in-depth rhetorical analysis.

This dissertation proposes the threshold of invisibility as a concept for identifying moments of contentious and sometimes confused critical discourse where the underpinnings of scholarly rhetorics are "laid bare" for rhetorical analysis. In this dissertation, the threshold of invisibility concept is used to explore a number of critical tools in established rhetorical theory, and then apply them to several case studies of critical discourse on new technologies and issues, including debates on digital photography, video games, and digital composing in college classrooms. The threshold of invisibility concept is a means to practice what Kenneth Burke calls a "criticism of criticism," an effort to explore the ideologies and methods of meaning-making that underpin scholarly rhetorics.

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THRESHOLDS OF INVISIBILITY: A PERSPECTIVE ON MOMENTS OF  
TRANSITION IN SCHOLARLY RHETORICS

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Robert D. Gilmor

June 2016

Advisor: Linda Bense-Meyers

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## Chapter One: Theorizing a Criticism of Criticism<sup>1</sup>

In a 1933 letter to his longtime friend Malcolm Cowley, Kenneth Burke suggests a distinction between the two kinds of criticism that each man was then attempting to write. Cowley, says Burke, is “trying to write an interpretation of certain cultural trends; [Burke is] trying to write on the *process of* interpretation” (Jay 206, emphasis added). The letter is, ostensibly, a response to a manuscript of Cowley’s (that would later become *Exile’s Return*), but this might be an illustration of a tendency that Paul Jay, editor of Burke and Cowley’s selected correspondence, identifies in their friendship: “Burke is a friend who gambles on strengthening a friendship by testing the stress it can handle; the more stress it can sustain, the stronger, and the more valuable, it is.” (viii). In this particular letter, Burke seems to put stress on his friendship with Cowley by stressing his own critical project in response to Cowley’s work. The result is illuminating.

Using Marx’s claim that “criticism of religion...is the beginning of all criticism” as a springboard, Burke suggests “that the *end* of all criticism is the criticism of criticism” (Jay 206). In this kind of work, a criticism of criticism, “one must try...to rehash the whole business of orientation, of imaginative and ideological symbolism, of 'meanings' in their double function of both guiding and misguiding us. One tries to find how meanings

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this chapter were presented at the Twentieth Biennial Conference of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric in Tübingen, Germany in July 2015.

arise” (Jay 206-207). Relating this idea to Cowley’s work on religion, Burke notes that the origins of meaning are often “close to the springs of ‘propriety’ which are found in religion and art” (Jay 207). A criticism of criticism often seeks to challenge this propriety. Burke describes this kind of process in terms of the action and the possible consequences:

...there are many situations in which, to meet some new purpose, we must do violence to an older schema of propriety. Of course, this point of view omits the 'escape' concept entirely, accepting it as natural and normal that people should try to escape from dissatisfactory conditions, but holding that certain systems of meaning may misguide them in their choice of *means of escape*. (Jay 207)

This passage gestures at some of the stakes of the work Burke was doing at the time and throughout his career. Burke was working on *Permanence and Change* (1935), his second major work. In his 1953 prologue to the new edition, Burke explains that the text was “written in the early days of the Great Depression, at a time when there was a general feeling that our traditional ways were headed for tremendous change, maybe even a permanent collapse” (*P&C* xlvii). Burke’s idea for a criticism of criticism is rooted in this time of instability and change, and his approach, what Ross Wolin describes as “cutting broad strokes across the traditional boundaries between aesthetics, politics, and psychology” or a “cut across the bias” (67), was a departure from standard critical thought, from established meanings, and an effort to find a new way forward.

The digging into orientations, into ideologies and meanings, the criticism of criticism, is also, presumably, the work that Burke was attempting throughout his career, whether he called it a criticism of criticism or “a synoptic way to talk about [people’s] talk-about” (*Grammar* 56). And in a sense, this is the kind of work that critics, that rhetoricians, often aim to do as well. But there is potential value in considering the origin

point, the context, of Burke's idea for a criticism of criticism: a time of change and instability. Naturally, a criticism of criticism may begin wherever there is criticism to be had, and its scope can be equally broad, as the thousands of pages of Burke's writings make clear. To focus, I'd like to suggest that we can find a point of emphasis, a way to perform a productive criticism of criticism, by identifying specific moments in the history of scholarly and critical discourse. These moments may not be invested with the same gravitas as the Great Depression, but critics have nonetheless encountered difficulty, or indeterminacy, or instability when attempting to engage with changes in technology, culture, or society.

At various times, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, critics of note—Burke, Roland Barthes, and Thomas Kuhn are all examples—have become concerned with particular trends in, or some quality of, contemporary discourse that reshapes critical thought in such a way as to obscure certain important matters or cause them to disappear entirely. That is, these critics contend that some facet of culture, literature, technology, or society became (or has become), naturalized or assumed, that something has taken on some sort of “second nature,” that something has been rendered “invisible” to critics, scholars, or general participants in discourse. I suggest that when this occurs—the moment when discourse renders something invisible—we have an opportunity to examine the underpinnings of critical discourse and scholarly rhetorics, to perform a criticism of criticism that gets at the embedded orientations, imaginative and ideological symbolism and meanings that motivate and drive critical discourse. I have come to call these moments “thresholds of invisibility.”

I use the term threshold of invisibility to refer to “moments of transition” in scholarly rhetorics, or when scholars encounter something new and attempt to account for it in a variety of terministic ways. I’ve used this name as a way to both identify an area of critical concern—a concept that comes up in scholarship and criticism in a variety of contexts—and to suggest an area or circumference to investigate. While scholars like Burke, Barthes, and Kuhn notice the general trend of the discourse—toward invisibility—other scholars attempt to navigate that discourse in an effort to make sense of the meeting of the old and the new. I want to suggest thresholds of invisibility as a way to focus our attention on moments when critical discourse is in flux, where, perhaps ironically, the workings of scholarly rhetorics may be most visible.

This dissertation proposes the idea of the threshold of invisibility as a means to focus attention on particular moments, or loci, of instability in critical discourse or scholarly rhetorics. While the maelstrom of discourse at a threshold of invisibility renders features of culture, technology, or society invisible, I argue that the underpinnings of criticism—what Burke calls the orientations, the imaginative and ideological symbolism, the meanings, and (in his later work) terministic screens—are wrenched from their normal context and “laid bare” by the indeterminacy of the rhetorical situation. This makes for a ripe site for rhetorical analysis of critical discourse. Using rhetorical theory and analytical methods found in the work of thinkers like Burke, Chaim Perelman, and others, I will explore a number of these moments of indeterminacy in order to suggest a general approach to a “criticism of criticism” for scholars looking to make sense of discursive practice in an ever-changing world.

This opening chapter will more fully establish the concept of the threshold of invisibility by exploring a number of key examples of the critical concern with invisibility from a range of different critics—thinkers like Roland Barthes, O.B. Hardison, and Thomas Kuhn all offer an approach to this kind of issue. From these examples, I will assemble a working definition of thresholds of invisibility and identify some key features. Then, using the work of Burke and of Chaim Perelman, I will suggest some rhetorical characteristics of thresholds of invisibility and explore some possible means for analyzing scholarly and critical rhetorics at and around the moments that these thresholds appear. Finally, I’ll briefly cover some examples of the kinds of discourse available for analysis at these moments, which will serve as something of a preview for subsequent chapters in this dissertation, which I will also summarize. Ultimately, the threshold concept is not a full-fledged analytical framework, but more of a way to focus on particular moments of critical discourse—a way to direct our attention should we want to be writing “criticism of criticism.”

### **The Concern with Invisibility**

Concern with invisibility marks a range of scholarship and thought throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. The idea appears under a number of different headings, or what Burke might call “chapter heads.” As the discourse examined below indicates, this particular issue contains a fair amount of complexity, but my idea is drawn primarily from the concerns of these scholars. After examining the critical thought that provides a general picture of this “concern,” I will draw on the features of discourse examined by these critics to offer a stipulative definition of the concept that explores a

number of general features of the threshold of invisibility. This will allow for a fuller discussion of the rhetorical dimensions of critical discourse at those moments.

For Burke, invisibility often takes the form of the customary, or the accumulated symbolic baggage of experience that is habitual rather than, perhaps, explicit in discourse. For instance, in a note at the beginning of *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke claims that “a definition of man is at least *implicit* in any writer’s comments on cultural matters,” so he makes that very topic the explicit point of conversation in the first essay of the collection (*LSA* 2). In typical Burkean fashion, the rest of the one page note underscores the complexity of symbolic interaction and explains that subsequent essays are necessary to adequately explore the definition and its constituent issues.

Burke’s five-part definition is now famous for rhetoricians and other critics, but it’s worth reciting here:

Man is  
the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal  
inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)  
separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making  
goaded by the spirit of hierarch (or moved by the sense of order)  
and rotten with perfection. (*LSA* 16)

All five parts of the definition are rich with Burke’s unique and insightful thought, but I am primarily interested in the third clause, “separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making.”

This third clause, like the others, functions for Burke as something akin to “a chapter head, under which appropriate observations might be assembled, as though

derived from it” (*LSA* 3). Appropriately, each clause seems to speak to issues found throughout Burke’s work, much like chapter heads for his thinking as a whole. In the “Definition of Man” essay, the third clause is intended to answer other definitions that would define humans as “tool-using animals,” as such a definition lacks the all-important connection to language (*LSA* 13). The specific terms of the clause, the main focus under the chapter head, regard the accumulated “second nature,” wherein the use of tools and language brings a creates a set of “artificial” practices that come to seem “natural.” Burke provides an anecdote of a power outage in New York City and the subsequent disruption: “As the newspapers the next day told of the event, one got almost a sense of mystical terror from the description of the darkened streets...in the ‘second nature’ of the city, something so natural as dark roadways at night was weirdly ‘unnatural’” (*LSA* 13). In this way, artificial light, in its omnipresence in an urban setting, becomes, somewhat ironically, invisible to the city’s inhabitants, who have presumably come to think of a city environment as “natural.” For Burke, this second-order of nature is a “special set of expectations, shaped by custom, [which] comes to seem ‘natural’” (*LSA* 13).

At the root of part of the concept is the idea of what constitutes the “natural” in discourse. Burke’s work serves to draw attention to these issues of symbolic interaction, of rhetoric and criticism, but I derive the concept of the threshold of invisibility from a range of critical practices, disciplines, concerns, and thinkers.

The wide-ranging criticism of Roland Barthes, in particular his formulation of “myth,” provides another perspective on this idea of a second nature. Barthes’ study of popular culture in the 1950s led him to suggest myth as a means to perform an



ideological critique of mass culture and the process of mystification that transforms petit-bourgeois culture into universal nature (9). Barthes' idea of myth is a way of describing this mystification, or how bourgeois ideology subtly replaces History with "Naturalness" (141-143). In other words, myth facilitates a process of establishing current (bourgeois) ideological features as eternal, as Natural, rather than as a product of History. For Barthes, this functions semiologically, as myth is a type of language defined by its utterance and not, significantly, by objects, concepts, or ideas (109). In Barthes' view of myth, the Saussurian sign—the combination of signifier and signified—becomes the signifier in a second-order semiological system (114). In the normal tri-dimensional pattern, meaning resides in the sign, the sum of signifier and signified; the signifier is "empty" (Barthes 113). In the second-order, tri-dimensional pattern of myth, the sign becomes the signifier, and, as a result, empties the sign of meaning (Barthes 114). This ultimately distorts or deforms the sign, allowing that shift in quality from historical to natural. For Barthes, the historical becomes natural or eternal; myth mystifies, it distorts and renders history invisible. Myth looks to erase the very words "bourgeois ideology" (Barthes 141).

For both Burke and Barthes, the linguistic and the cultural, the ideological, are tied closely together. Burke's interest in symbolic interaction and Barthes' in semiology, in this particular context, both speak to a kind of habituation or invisibility. As we see in Barthes, the issue is also one of the making of meaning—myth does not merely replace the historical with (false) naturalness, but distorts by means of the second-order semiological function. Meaning is *drained* from signs in the system of myth. The

mythological sign does not adequately describe, does not adequately *mean*, the present. And trouble in meaning, which is at the heart of the threshold of invisibility concept, features prominently in the work of critics discussing the sweeping changes in culture, society, and technology in the twentieth century.

For instance, literary critic and long-time president of the Folger Library O.B. Hardison finds a challenge to meaning in the massive changes in culture and technology in the twentieth century as evidence of a major shift in human thought. This challenge begins, in a way, with the very issue of invisibility. For Hardison, central concepts in the areas of nature, history, language, art, and human evolution have all undergone a shift, as have the vocabularies and images that frame these concepts (xi). Technological and cultural innovations—the television is one example—often become, a generation after their introduction, given, “part of the shape of consciousness, you might say, rather than the content of consciousness” (Hardison xii). In this way, such changes become both obvious—televisions are clearly present in the home—and invisible, that is, their role is generally unconsidered in itself. The cumulative result of such changes across the core concepts that Hardison identifies is a “turning point—a kind of phase transition from one set of values to another” that takes the metaphorical form of a barrier to be passed through (5). Hardison’s term for this barrier (borrowed, he claims, from the “search for extraterrestrial life”) is the “horizon of invisibility”.<sup>2</sup>

A horizon of invisibility cuts across the geography of modern culture. Those who have passed through it cannot put their experience into familiar words and images because the languages they have inherited are inadequate to the new worlds they

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<sup>2</sup> My partial debt to Hardison for terms is obvious. I will discuss more of my reasoning below.

inhabit. They therefore express themselves in metaphors, paradoxes, contradictions, and abstractions rather than languages that 'mean' in the traditional way – in assertions that are apparently incoherent or collages using fragments of the old to create enigmatic symbols of the new. (5-6)

In Hardison's formulation, those on either side of the threshold do not perceive things in the same way and also, quite tellingly, struggle to communicate their experience of crossing over. The problem of "meaning" here is rooted in issues of linguistic stasis. For Hardison, it is the visual arts in the twentieth century that have had some success "expressing an abstract aesthetic" indicative of the kinds of changes he diagnoses, but "language seems to resist the trend. It seems to lag behind the other arts, alternating between baffled silence and the celebration of exhausted pieties" (2-3). He locates this problem in meaning making, but what is more telling here is the relationship between the visual and language; for Hardison, the former seems to succeed where the latter fails. Or rather, language supposedly "fails" where the visual succeeds. While this is certainly strong language (and perhaps too strongly stated), it does open some interesting questions about the flexibility of the visual and the linguistic in dealing with change.

The problem, as Hardison sees it, is that "language is still too deeply associated with meaning – hence with the sense of the past and stability of identity – to be as flexible as visual imagery" (4). Here we see a more explicit discussion of the implicit issues Burke is interested in "hashing" out—meanings that guide and misguide. I think that Hardison's instinct is more or less correct: language often seems to be the privileged vehicle of meaning and stands atop an implied hierarchy of media, especially in comparison to images or the visual. In critiquing the stasis or inflexibility of language in meaning making, Hardison proposes a (somewhat radical) idea that language *need not be*

privileged with or inseparable from meaning: “To admit that meaning can be separated from language seems to surrender an anchor holding man to the earth” (4).<sup>3</sup> On either side of the horizon of invisibility, then, are (potentially) different views on what language can do when it comes to meaning, but this is also an issue of how language can—or cannot—function across the threshold.

Hardison evokes St. Augustine and examples of fourth century Christian conversion:

[It] was ‘like’ speaking a new and therefore unintelligible language ... There was nothing ‘like’ the old in the new culture, and by the same token, there was nothing ‘like’ the new culture in the old ... The simple truths of each languages sounded like nonsense to speakers of the other. In this sense, those who cross the barrier were truly invisible to those who had not. (7)<sup>4</sup>

What might be called fervency at moments of conversions calls ahead to Dennis Baron’s discussion of Luddites (he mentions the Unabomber’s campaign against technology several times) that I will discuss below, but the Augustinian example suggests an older origin for this kind of critical concern, and contains some additional promise for the applicability of the threshold of invisibility idea. Hardison quickly follows his reference to Augustine with claims that, while the transition in modern culture is similar, it “obviously does not involve religious conversion” (7). Rather, it involves “movement into the unknown. The experience is sometimes frightening and often confusing, but it can also be exciting and challenging” (7). Regardless of the space Hardison puts between

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<sup>3</sup> I’d suggest that this anchor might be read as a form of logocentrism, but I don’t necessarily find anything in Hardison that would state the case quite so explicitly.

<sup>4</sup> Hardison refers here, I believe, to *Confessions* Book VII, Chapter 10. F.J. Sheed translates the phrase in question as the “region of unlikeness” (118), whereas Henry Chadwick translates the passage as “region of dissimilarity,” and notes a reference to Plotinus (123).

his idea and religious conversion, the language used to describe these two thresholds of invisibility (Hardison's and St. Augustine's) is strikingly similar and, I argue, a vital constituent part of crossing the threshold and the multiplicity of orientations that converge at that moment.

For Hardison, the concern with invisibility takes the form of a barrier, a division across which communication is difficult. While I believe this kind of *discontinuity* is one key feature of thresholds of invisibility, another important concern is that of *continuity*, or how difference itself might become invisible. This concern is perhaps most noticeable in Thomas Kuhn's seminal text *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

Kuhn's revolutionary model of scientific progress introduced the idea of the scientific revolution, or major shift between paradigms in scientific thought.<sup>5</sup> The overall model of scientific advancement that Kuhn suggests involves a series of periods of "normal science," or "research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice" (10). Punctuating these periods of normal science, or paradigms, are scientific discoveries or revolutions that shift the foundations of scientific inquiry, hence the concept of the "paradigm shift." After these shifts, normal science proceeds from a new basis (new theories, new models, etc). This is a grossly oversimplified explanation of Kuhn's text, but the important element for discussion here is how the shift in emphasis is perceived and, interestingly, remembered.

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<sup>5</sup> A paradigm for Kuhn derives from thinkers or texts that have two characteristics: "Their achievement was sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity. Simultaneously, it was sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve" (10).

In Kuhn's estimation, the major shifts in scientific thought, the revolutions, are masked by post-revolution thought; in a way, paradigm shifts are narrativized in the terms of the new paradigm, a process that disguises the revolutionary process. This is most evident in textbooks and popular histories of science, which, by their nature, only "record the stable *outcome* of past revolutions and thus display the bases of the current normal-scientific tradition" (Kuhn 137). The result is that the history of science is presented as a narrative of progress where "scientists have [always] striven for the particular objectives that are embodied in today's paradigms" (Kuhn 140). Kuhn does suggest that "misconstructions" present in these texts have useful pedagogic functions (clarity and coherence, presumably), but this leads to a view of science as "linear and accumulative," even to scientists looking at their own work (139). But, crucially, this is a version of scientific tradition that "never existed" (Kuhn 138). Language, then, has a strong role in reconstructing the history of science and, subsequently, contemporary conceptions of what science *is*. The revolutionary shifts Kuhn posits are thus rendered "invisible" by the creation and adoption of linguistic misconstructions (140).

Kuhn suggests that the scientific community is most prone to the process of creating linear narratives of its own history, but that other disciplines also tend toward this same activity (138). The tendency is more prominent in the sciences, Kuhn claims, because "the results of scientific research show no obvious dependence upon historical context of the inquiry, and partly because, except during crisis and revolution, the scientist's contemporary position seems so secure" (138). Even so, Kuhn indicates that the issue of narrativization, of misconstruing histories, is more common. Indeed, "The

temptation to write history backward is both omnipresent and perennial” (Kuhn 138). More so, Kuhn admits—in the preface to the 1970 second edition—that his formulation of the revolutionary model is based primarily on the structures of change in other fields: “Historians of music, of the arts, of political development, and of many other human activities have long described their subjects in the same way” (208). He even admits to being “puzzled” that thinkers in other fields have adopted his approach and terminology to their own areas, given how much of his thinking was drawn from there in the first place. Kuhn nevertheless reemphasizes the differences between science and other fields, in part due to general views of the progress in the sciences, “which had been widely thought to develop in a different way” than other fields (208-209). Still, the thread of influence from the “arts,” broadly constructed, to the sciences and back to the arts suggests, for me, a common commitment to or concern with issues of change and invisibility. Kuhn’s formulation of the idea is probably the most famous, but it speaks to a broader, if more muted, concern.

It would be difficult to overstate the influence of Kuhn’s thinking on a wide range of discursive practices in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, especially in the public (and probably corporate) sphere, where “paradigm shift” is an oft-uttered commonplace. But Kuhn’s ideas have also generated controversy and criticism, both in his field and others. The range of conversation on Kuhn is too broad to cover here, but it’s worth considering at least one relevant critique: that of philosopher and rhetorician Stephen Toulmin. In *Human Understanding* (1972), Toulmin offers an extended examination of Kuhn’s work, both in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and beyond.

Toulmin's view in general—situated in a larger critique of the term “revolution” in conceptual change—is that Kuhn's revolutionary model is too invested in the clean break, or the clear, bright line between one paradigm and the next. Toulmin's critique of the development of Kuhn's reasoning includes some of the latter's refinements of his idea, toward a more nuanced view of conceptual change wherein major revolutions are replaced by more common, even continuous “micro-revolutions” (*Human* 122). These revisions, for Toulmin, speak to the general inadequacy of revolutionary models in explaining conceptual change. Toulmin claims that the incompatibility of successive paradigms does not preclude communication across the divide; scientists, provided they are in agreement with general disciplinary goals, should be able to communicate regardless of theoretical differences:

Radical incomprehension is inescapable only when the parties to a dispute have nothing in common even in their disciplinary ambitions. Given the very minimum continuity of disciplinary aims, scientists with totally incongruous theoretical ideas will still, in general, have a basis for comparing the explanatory merits of their respective explanations, and rival paradigms or presuppositions—even though incompatible on the ‘theoretical’ level—will remain rationally commensurable as alternative ways of tackling a common set of ‘disciplinary’ tasks. (*Human* 126).

In this passage, Toulmin echoes a concept from his earlier work regarding the effectiveness of arguments across “fields,” or whether certain arguments function properly regardless of disciplinary context (field-invariant arguments) or whether they rely heavily on the internal logic of their parent discourse (field-dependent arguments); for instance, arguments based on geometric proofs might not hold in a discussion of social policy (*The Uses* 15). For Toulmin, adherence to disciplinary goals within the sciences should allow scientists to communicate, even considering their differences. In



this case, there would be no barrier, no bright line separating the two groups of communicants (no Augustinian “unlikeness”). Toulmin ultimately proposes a different model of conceptual change, one that more adequately accounts for continued communication rather than focusing on breaks in communication. Instead of revolutionary models, says Toulmin, “we ... need to construct an *evolutionary* account, which explains how ‘conceptual populations’ [or different groups of communicants] come to be progressively transformed” (*Human* 122). Evolution, as a model, promised to account for the continuity of scientific discussion and thinking, whereas the revolutionary model relies too heavily on discontinuity.

Whether it is Kuhn or Toulmin who is “right” is ultimately immaterial here; what we can see in this discussion of model and counter-model is an enactment of critical concern that informs the threshold of invisibility idea. While Kuhn and Toulmin appear to disagree on the profundity of difference, they may actually be differing as to the *type* of difference. For Kuhn, the difference is pronounced and is one of worldviews; for Toulmin, the difference is at the level of logic in field or theory, discourse—talking across that difference—is still possible. I would suggest that both thinkers are concerned with the indeterminacy of discourse at moments of conceptual change, be they revolutionary or evolutionary.

We can see further evidence of this—along with similar distinctions between revolution (discontinuity) and evolution (continuity)—in discourse on literacy and technology. Dennis Baron, in his seminal essay “From Pencils to Pixels” and a later book *A Better Pencil*, suggests that new technologies—and in particular writing and literacy

technologies such as pencils, pens, computers, and so on—go through a process by which they gain acceptance, which, most of the time, means a progression from invention to “accessibility, function, and authentication” (“From Pencils” 16).<sup>6</sup> The steps are fairly self-explanatory; a technology is invented, becomes more accessible, is shown to function, and finally becomes an accepted—authenticated—means of communication (Baron, “From Pencils” 16-17). In the last step, technologies must prove their “trustworthiness” by a process of authentication, or overcoming a fear of fraud (“From Pencils” 21-22). Examples of this might include secure online shopping or the recognition of email as legitimate legal communication, neither of which held such “authentic” status just a few years ago.

Crucially, though, the qualities of dependency may not be dissimilar to what is sometimes called natural—the point where older technologies become “automatic and invisible” (Baron, “From Pencils” 31; *A Better* 71). After this point, technologies—the pencil, for instance—are, as Baron says, invisible, are taken for granted, are felt to be pure or natural, are no longer seen as “technology” at all. At this point, “[w]e don't notice our writing machines until something goes wrong” (Baron, *A Better* 71). Pencils can break and computers can crash, and only in those instances do they figuratively reappear.

For Baron the threshold lies somewhere beyond the authentication of a new writing technology, when that technology becomes so common or ubiquitous that it seems natural. But as we've seen, the transitional point is not a clean break, a moment when everyone seems to agree on the validity of the new technology or when the last

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<sup>6</sup> More specifically, Baron indicates that the spread of technologies depend on these stages.

remaining Luddite reluctantly converts. Baron, in effect, narrativizes the development and acceptance of new writing technologies. Technologies move from rare to ubiquitous, from novel to invisible, but the narrative is not always uniform; after all, pencils, while widely accepted, are not accepted tools for signing legal documents. There are also likely to be hold-outs—not everyone embraces all new technologies, and even those who do vary widely in their estimation of the importance or value of this or that piece of technology. Invisibility, for Baron, is an issue of acceptance, of habituation. Technologies become automatic, taken for granted. The view from either “side” of the computers in writing issue carries with it a sense of invisibility: pencils are natural for some—Baron discusses various incarnations of the Luddite movement—and therefore their technological nature is invisible; computers are depended upon, taken for granted, and are therefore invisible to others; most importantly of all, writing is rarely understood as a technology by anyone, and thus part of its essence remains invisible. In this way, what we recognize as writing technology lays at the center of a convergence of perspectives, all of which estimate its essence in a different fashion.

But Baron’s concerns with literacy technologies, and the development of writing technologies in particular, suggests another area of concern at the threshold of invisibility. Baron deals explicitly with—and even focuses his attention on complicating—the dichotomies that arise in discussions on technology and change. In the galaxy of writing technology, computers are new and pencils are old, and this is enough, Baron suggests, to create the illusion of discontinuity, as “[w]e have a way of getting so used to writing technologies that we come to think of them as natural rather than

technological. We assume that pencils are a natural way to write because they are old” (Baron, “From Pencils” 32). Part of the concern about new technologies is rooted in a perception of technology being negative or harmful—Baron points to historical examples such as Ned Ludd (hence, Luddites) and Ted Kaczynski, the infamous Unabomber (*A Better* 20-28). While Baron’s examples are perhaps a bit radical, the dichotomy at the core of this problem for other, less mail-bomb inclined critics remains that of nature versus technology. Not unlike Toulmin’s critique of Kuhn, Baron suggests the pattern of development—his narrative of acceptance—to undermine a misconception brought about by habituation: the pencil is still a writing technology, even if we have come to accept it as natural. The natural/technological split is, for Baron, a false dichotomy.

As both the Kuhn-Toulmin and Baron examples illustrate, there is a tendency for writers concerned with invisibility to either argue for *discontinuity*—a clean break between eras (paradigms) or qualities (natural/technological)—or for *continuity*—an evolutionary approach to conceptual change or a progression of phases for acceptance of technologies. Tied up in these tendencies we can also find the other concerns discussed here—the effect of habituation in Burke’s “second nature” and Barthes’ second-order semiological system, the draining of meaning in Barthes’ myth and the effectiveness of meaning shifting from language to visual in Hardison, and Hardison’s barrier—or horizon—of unlikeness. The issues here constitute what might be called a cluster of critical concerns that, as I will demonstrate in the next section, make up the fabric of the threshold of invisibility concept.

## The Threshold of Invisibility

The critical concerns detailed in the previous section all speak to a moment when something disappears due to some issue in discourse. The nature of that disappearance differs—habituation, draining of meaning, conceptual change—but the core idea finds expression in the work of scholars at similar times voicing similar concerns. I have formulated the threshold of invisibility idea from these concerns. My partial debt to Hardison for terms—his “horizon of invisibility”—is obvious. I’ve chosen to adopt “threshold” as my metaphor, rather than “horizon” for a number of reasons. Threshold invokes an entry point, such as a doorway or gate, a border, a “beginning state or action,” a technical limit (such as the threshold of consciousness), and, finally, the “magnitude or intensity that must be exceeded for a certain reaction or phenomenon to occur” (“Threshold” 2a-2c).

I also use the word “threshold” following Gerard Genette, namely his *Paratexts* (*Seuils*, or thresholds, in the original French). For Genette, a paratext is something that allows a text to become a book—an extra-textual element that somehow shapes interpretation of the text (1). For my purposes, the quality of the “threshold” is key:

More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or – a word Borges used apropos of a preface – a 'vestibule' that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside returning back. It is an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text), an edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, 'a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's hold reading of the text.' (Genette 1-2)

Though I am here dealing with instances—or general areas—of discourse, a paratext as threshold, as Genette formulates it, is a useful analogy. A threshold of invisibility is a

similar space of indeterminacy with qualities that another characterization, such as “moment of transition” might not capture: these are instances where a scholarly rhetoric is fully committed neither to one direction or another, but is attempting to navigate an undefined zone without a clear boundary. In addition, one or both of the entry and the exit, the before and the after, might be so unclear as to be invisible to scholars or critics in these moments.

I suggest that at these particular moments, these thresholds of invisibility, multiple perspectives—what Burke calls orientations or terministic screens—converge into a cluster of orientations whose respective discourses seems somehow distorted, mystified, or incongruous. At these moments, the orientations have their “unlikeness” underscored, allowing for rhetorical analysis into the “make-up” of discursive practice before, at, and after the moment.

I define threshold of invisibility to mean *a complex of discursive practices or symbolic interaction where there is apparent division between adherence to different linguistic orientations toward a technology, medium, or formal concept*. I will unpack this definition here and throughout this dissertation, but in short, a threshold of invisibility occurs at or around a moment when scholars or thinkers encounter something—usually something new such as the cinema, television, the computer, and so on—and have trouble talking *about* it or *to* each other. There are two components that this definition and approach allow us to consider: first, the “features” of discourse where the “trouble” occurs, and second, the rhetorical makeup—and the means to analyze it—of that discourse.

The discursive “trouble” mentioned above comes in a number of forms. First, there’s the possibility that critics have become so accustomed to their terministic screens that their terms have become, as it were, invisible. As a result, such critics may attempt to apply terms rooted in particular orientations—toward, say, the novel and prose literature—to new forms or media, like the cinema or even video games. Alternatively, critics may be struck by the very “newness” of something, and attempt to draw a clear line between forms, genres, media, or even historical periods, which may result in the erasure of the overlap between these things—television, for instance, is not merely visual but includes both aural and textual components. This has a tendency to generate dichotomies, such as text vs. image or analogue vs. digital, which are often oversimplified or mostly false. In addition, scholars will sometimes struggle to position a particular moment of change in a larger timeline or narrative of critical thought, but these efforts sometimes result in a conflation or confusion of the synchronic and the diachronic—histories of one medium may be deployed to explain the present moment of unrelated topics, for instance.

These ideas make up the four most readily available features of discourse at a threshold of invisibility, all of which are in response (actively or otherwise) to the indeterminacy of the situation: 1) some form of *habituation* of terms or ideas, 2) identification or suggestion of some kind of *barrier(s) to communication*, 3) some form of *narrativization* that attempts to contextualize the moment, and/or 4) some reversal, confusion, or conflation of *synchronic and diachronic* qualities of discourse or thinking. The and/or here is critical: this list of features is not meant to be exhaustive, or indicative

of a set of criteria that must be met in order to include discursive exchanges under the umbrella of the threshold of invisibility idea. Rather, I suggest that *when one or more of these features appear in discourse*, we have the opportunity to “hash out” the underpinnings of a critical or scholarly discourse *as a result of the indeterminacy of the moment, or because that discourse is now slightly out of its customary context*.

Furthermore, these four features are not simple labels to be attached to parts of a discourse. Instead, I suggest that they make up a generative set of qualities—a set of features more in keeping with Burke’s dramatic pentad and the ratios between each pentadic term. On the one hand, Burke’s pentad—the terms act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose—allow for a labeling of the components of a symbolic interaction. But they also make up the core of his dramatism, which he defines as “a method of analysis and a corresponding critique of terminology designed to show that the most direct route to the study of human relations and human motives is *via* a methodological inquiry into cycles or clusters of terms and their functions” (qtd. in Wolin 152). The terms do function to identify—the “agent” is the speaker, the “scene” is a presidential debate, etc.—but they are more a starting point than a mere label. The pentadic elements are not a reductive system of description, but, as Ross Wolin suggests, rather a generative “mechanism for imagining all sorts of possibilities” (Wolin 167). How the terms combine—the ratios—can open up interpretative possibilities; for instance, the “scene” of a presidential debate will influence the quality of the discourse, “act,” allowing a scene-act ratio to be useful in rhetorical analysis (all of the combinations of the five terms are valid for this purpose). In this way, the pentad is a generative means of analysis that Wolin compares to the stasis



theory of classical rhetoric. Thomas Conley's definition of stasis theory is particularly appropriate here: "Stasis theory was designed to enable one both to locate the relevant points at issue in a dispute and to discover applicable arguments drawn from the appropriate 'places' (*loci*, the Latin equivalent of the Greek *topoi*)" (Conley 32).

In keeping both with dramatism and stasis, I suggest my four features of thresholds of invisibility—habituation, barriers to communication, narrativization, and synchronic/diachronic confusion—as generative qualities, a way to "locate relevant points" and discover applicable analysis for the discourse in question. To accomplish this, I will suggest a set of analytical tools drawn primarily from the work of Burke and from Chaim Perelman: Burke's orientations (or terministic screens) and associational clusters along with Perelman's dissociation. I will now offer a brief introduction to these ideas, which will make up the core of my analytical method throughout the dissertation. Since each of these ideas arguably warrants its own separate treatment, I will offer an in-depth exploration of their make-up and place in the corpus of important rhetorical theory—much of Burke's work and Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's seminal treatise *The New Rhetoric*—in the first interchapter section.

As I've suggested, thresholds of invisibility feature a convergence of different orientations, or a tangle of "disrelated" views, to paraphrase Burke. The orientation is a key part of analysis of these thresholds. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke explores the concept of orientation, or a view of the world built up through experience and accumulated, or accustomed, use of particular sets of symbols. Orientations affect how someone reacts to new situations, based as they are on expectancy (14). Adherence to a

certain orientation will shape how someone reacts or approaches any symbolic engagement, old or new.

Burke later developed the idea into its more commonly known conception, the terministic screen. A terministic screen, like an orientation, is formed from symbolic actions and subsequently influences how people engage with the symbolic actions that they encounter. Burke equates different terminologies to multiple images of the same object photographed using different color filters. This has the effect of drawing the viewer's attention to different textures and qualities of the object photographed (Burke, *Language* 45).<sup>7</sup> Terminologies function the same way, as “any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention to some channels rather than others. . . . A textbook on physics, for instance, turns the *attention* in a different direction from a textbook on law or psychology” (*Language* 45).<sup>8</sup> This has the result of shaping observations due to the way such observations are expressed (the terminology used). But Burke also suggests that

*many of the 'observations' are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made. In brief, much that we take as observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms. (Burke, Language 46)*

An important part of how terministic screens can be considered resides in the make-up of terms. In the “Terministic Screens” essay, Burke suggests that “there are two kinds of terms: terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart” (Burke,

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<sup>7</sup> It's worth noting that Burke makes use of a visual metaphor to describe a linguistic concept. Likewise, my own metaphor—invisibility—does much the same in describing discursive practices. Rather than a conceptual problem, I consider this an enactment of the mutual “contamination” of icon and logos discussed at length in Interchapter Three.

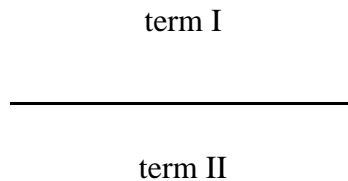
<sup>8</sup> Burke purposefully italicizes the first two letters of attention to, as it were, direct the attention, and also to differentiate between attention and intention.

*Language* 49). Thus, how terministic screens define things relies on the combination of terms that either unite or divide. For instance, the different terministic screens that make up perspectives in a debate between evolution and creationism might be reduced to a different choice of types of terms; on the one hand, an evolutionary perspective stresses unity or continuity between animals and humans, whereas a creationist (or theological) view stresses division or discontinuity between humans and animals (Burke, *Language* 50). This kind of impulse also informs the drive to classify and categorize.

The interplay of terms in a terministic screen might be better illustrated by Burke's earlier work, where he explored the idea of "associational clusters." An associational cluster is made up of groups of terms or phrases that, when treated in connection with each other, can uncover the specific situation in which a writer composes. The idea of the associational cluster relies on "the fact that no one quite uses the word in its mere dictionary sense. And the overtones of a usage are revealed 'by the company it keeps' in the utterances of a given speaker or writer" (*Philosophy* 35). When certain terms are used, they are inevitably connected to other terms used in conjunction (the company they keep); for instance, there are palpable ideological connections in political discourse in the United States between terms such as "democracy," "freedom," "liberty," "equality" and others, such that when these terms are used they often stand in for or suggest the other terms in the cluster. Each term, then, can take on some of the significance of the others, which requires the tracking down of the elements of each cluster.

These two Burkean ideas, orientations/terministic screens and associational clusters, provide, with the pentadic ratios, a means to both identify and analyze the discursive make-up of scholarly rhetorics at thresholds of invisibility, where I suggest that a number of different orientations come together in an indeterminate “wrangle” (to use another of Burke’s metaphors). But I also believe that analysis of these moments requires an additional means of examination—as scholars encounter new situations, new forms, new media, and so on, they are presented with the kinds of problems that Burke suggests—trying to weave together the old and the new to make sense of it all.

Solving the philosophical “problems” of investigating a new form necessitates the reconfiguring of key concepts by a process that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call “dissociation.” Dissociation involves separating, disuniting, or modifying the relationship between two terms or notions—a pairing—in order to generate a new conceptual relationship or apparatus for the solving of a (usually philosophical) problem (190, 414). These problems usually consist of opposing or conflicting propositions, that is, incompatibilities. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca represent dissociation via a pair of terms, term I and term II, where term I is the primary site of incompatibility and term II offers a means to resolve these incompatibilities. This is visually represented, in general, as follows:



Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's prototypical dissociative pairing is appearance/reality. Incompatibilities in appearances, where appearance is labeled "term I," are reconciled or rendered compatible, by means of reality, labeled "term II." Following the general visual representation, this pairing appears as follows:

appearance

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reality

Term I, reality, "provides a criterion, a norm which allows us to distinguish those aspects of term I which are of value from those which are not" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 416). Reality, in this pairing, corrects or reframes appearance such that contradictions are smoothed out or reconciled. Term II, in general, does this kind of work on term I; term II offers some sort of frame, lens, set of values, or some other means to resolve the incompatibilities or shortcomings in term I.

A parallel can here be drawn to Kuhn's paradigm shifts: the work of dissociation requires considerable effort, yet afterward the changes are broadly accepted:

At the theoretical level, it is the compromise solution to incompatibilities which calls for the greatest effort and is most difficult to justify because it requires a new structuration of reality. On the other hand, once it is established, once the concepts have been dissociated and restructured, compromise tends to appear as the inescapable solution and to react on the aggregate of concepts into which it is inserted. (415)

Dissociation, in this sense, is as much of a transition moment as a scientific revolution or a conversion event. Prior to the threshold it is a considerable undertaking, but afterwards it has so changed the basic grounds of the orientation that it appears obvious, even eternally so. What this should also demonstrate, as I mention above, is that dissociation is

a both a process carried out in discourse and an analytical model for examining that discourse. In general, dissociation might be said to occur whenever a term is used as a corrective to another term or where one idea is used as a way to re-think another. In short, dissociation occurs frequently in critical discourse, especially, I would argue, at the intersection of perspectives found in the vicinity of a threshold of invisibility.

Taken together, the work of Burke and Perelman introduced here provides useful tools for analyzing scholarly rhetorics at thresholds of invisibility. In the final section of this opening chapter, I'll explore a few brief examples—teasers, really—of the kind of discourse that the rest of this dissertation will examine.

### **Discursive Practices at the Threshold and Chapter Outlines**

I'd like to briefly look at how some of the “four features” are enacted at a threshold of invisibility, and how they might open up possibilities for analysis. Some scholars use the issue of habituation to suggest a narrative of historical periods based on discontinuity—on occasion, this takes the form of drawing a strong distinction between forms, media, or the thinking about them by, in a sense, “naming the divide” between them. For instance, cultural critic Neil Postman's critique of television in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* follows Barthes' formulation of myth. Postman suggests that television is “so deeply embedded in our consciousness that it is invisible...Its ecology, which includes not only its physical characteristics and symbolic code but the conditions in which we normally attend to it, is taken for granted, accepted as natural” (79). Postman goes on to posit a transition between two historical periods in American public thought marked by different epistemologies. The first historical period, under the

“sovereignty” of the printing press, Postman names “the Age of Exposition” (63). This era is marked by “a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively and sequentially; a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction; a large capacity for detachment and objectivity; and a tolerance for delayed response” (Postman 63). The new era, on the other hand, Postman names “The Age of Show Business.” This era, dominated by television, presents a series of problems for discourse in America, starting with a lack of critical stance toward mass entertainment. Where the old era, “The Age of Exposition,” was dominated by reason, in the new, television-centric era, “The Age of Show Business,” “the content of much of our public discourse has become dangerous nonsense” (Postman 16).

In Postman’s case, the problem of *habituation*—television is widely accepted and invisible—calls up the need to differentiate between historical eras, to write a narrative separating two epistemologies. He enacts a critique of discourse, culture, and technology that exhibits a commitment to certain intellectual, even moral, values: exposition is good, entertainment is bad. There is a demonstrable cluster of concepts around exposition—conceptual, deductive, and sequential thought; reason and order; detachment and objectivity—that Postman clearly associates with positive qualities. The opposite, the “Age of Show Business” is marked, explicitly, by a “lack of critical stance,” or, in effect, the opposite of the previous era. In this case, habituation and narrative are key features in analyzing Postman’s discourse at the print/television threshold of invisibility.

A similar “ratio” might be observed in some of the work of semiotician Gunther Kress. Writing in 2003 about dominant forms of meaning making in contemporary literate practices, Kress suggests a neat divide between two eras and “modes:”

The two modes of writing and of image are each governed by distinct logics, and have distinctly different affordances. The organization of writing ... is governed by ... the logic of sequence of its elements in time, and temporally governed arrangements. The organization of the image, by contrast, is governed by the logic of space, and by the logic of simultaneity. (*Literacy* 1-2)

For Kress, writing and image are completely distinct in logic and in the way they construct meaning. More than this, though, Kress suggests a subversive, even liberatory power of the new logic of image, wherein the readers are no longer subject to the somewhat hegemonic power of the author (*Literacy* 6). Here again there appears to be a combination of the narrativization and habituation features. But whereas Postman seems to offer narrative as a result of habituation, Kress seems to be narrativizing—pronouncing two distinct logics and eras—in order to attack the habituated, or entrenched “power” of the author. I will return to Kress in Chapter Four for a more in-depth discussion of this issue.

While these examples are only brief glosses, I think they provide a valuable view of the kinds of discourse occurring at these thresholds of invisibility. They also illustrate why analysis into these discursive moments is necessary. Critics and scholars often attempt to offer as clear a picture as they can of what they see happening. But to borrow a Burkean refrain, “it’s more complicated than that.” The very indeterminacy of a threshold of invisibility defies the sort of classification that these authors (and many others) propose. For instance, while both Postman and Kress would suggest a clean break between text and the visual, I’ll argue in Interchapter Three, the work of scholars such



W.J.T. Mitchell and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam demonstrate that text and image are rarely, if ever, pure or separate from each other—rather, text and image are constantly “contaminated” by each other (Mitchell, *Iconology* 42, Shohat and Stam 55).

Simple answers are problematic, and the indeterminacy of these discussions offers some opportunities to study the operative values—the terministic screens—of scholarly rhetorics. How might Postman’s critiques of television speak to broader scholarly, even public, concerns with the making of meaning? And what might Kress stand to gain by arguing for such a clear break between writing and image in terms of semiotics and/or institutional politics? These questions, posed at these particular moments or thresholds, may be of great use in thinking through key features of contemporary scholarly rhetorics.

I’ve suggested that the threshold of invisibility idea provides valuable starting points, useful avenues into the orientations, the symbolisms and meanings behind these rhetorics—in other words, these are a good places to practice a criticism of criticism. This dissertation will explore a number of such moments.

Each major chapter focuses on a particular case study, or a set of discourses, discussions, arguments, or debates in and around a specific threshold of invisibility. Between chapters, I offer a series of interchapters to cover important issues. I borrow the interchapter format from Joseph Harris, who intersperses them throughout his history of Composition studies, *A Teaching Subject*. The idea of the interchapter, for Harris, allows him to connect the work of history of the discipline (the main focus of his text) to its day-to-day practice, or “how the issues raised in [his] book inform (and are informed by) specific teaching aims, practices, and situations” (x). The function of the interchapters in

this dissertation is to examine important concepts, theories, or discussions that in some way inform or shape the topics of the main chapters but do not, in and of themselves, require the extended analysis or explanation of a full chapter.

The first interchapter offers a thorough discussion of the relevant rhetorical theory I apply throughout this dissertation. The main ideas explored are Burke's *orientations* and *terministic screens*, along with *associational clusters*, and Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *dissociation*. I've already covered these concepts briefly in this first chapter, but the interchapter will offer a full, in-depth overview of the concepts, their use, and some context of their place in rhetorical theory more broadly—for instance, I use the work of I.A. Richards and Michael McGee to elaborate on Burke's *associational clusters*. Overall, Interchapter One offers a full exploration of the crucial rhetorical theory that I refer to and use throughout the rest of the dissertation

Chapter Two examines discussions surrounding digital photography and its potential influence on photographic culture. As digital imaging technology became more widespread in the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars, photographers, journalists, and other started to consider the possible ramifications of the new turn to the digital. Some critics predicted a radical departure from previous approaches to photography, and suggested that digital photography was, itself, an entirely new medium. Many of these same critics, however, were divided on just what that new medium was capable of; some envisioned an explosion of artistic and technical possibility, an era of “post-photography,” while others feared that the digital would destroy core values of accurate and objective image making, ushering in the “death of photography.” Still other critics

saw digital imaging as just the latest in a line of photographic technologies and claimed that photographic culture, as a whole, would stay largely consistent. The friction between perspectives for discontinuity (the “death of photography” crowd) and those for continuity (the critics emphasizing photographic culture over technology), generated a wealth of complicated discussion and debate that formed the first threshold of invisibility for consideration in this project.

As I’ve argued above, one characteristic of discourse at a threshold of invisibility is the attempt to narrativize whatever “change” might be taking place, an issue discussed at length in Kuhn’s work on paradigms. But, as I will suggest in a number of places in this dissertation, these paradigms are themselves rhetorical: they might inform or shape some of the terms of any given terministic screen. In Interchapter Two, I will examine two paradigms—different narrativizations—of scholarship on cinematic history. For decades after the ascension of the cinema to a position of commercial and artistic prominence, scholars and historians of film viewed the cinema’s early days, the late 1890s through to the mid 1910s, as an era of experimentation and discovery that was unified by a single goal: the creation of an effective means of cinematic storytelling. By the late 1970s, however, film scholars had begun to reevaluate these early days and early films. Scholars began to see early films as more diverse, and the cinema as a medium that only later became primarily narrative. While this latter paradigm took root in film studies, the paradigm favoring the “pursuit” of narrative nevertheless remained in circulation and, as I argue elsewhere, influenced critics writing about unrelated media. The goal of the second interchapter is to describe both paradigms and establish their core concepts.

Chapter Three features a particularly contentious scholarly argument from the late 1990s and early 2000s that was dubbed the “narratology versus ludology” debate. This (so-called) debate was staged over a fundamental question about an up-and-coming medium at the time, the video game. One “side” suggested studying games in terms of the stories they attempted to tell, while the other side claimed that stories were hardly relevant to games, or were even inimical to the core of gameplay: the abstract rule sets that made a game a game. This latter group, the self-styled “ludologists,” contended that video games were essentially unique from all other media, and thus required a wholly new set of critical tools and as well as their own discipline of academic study. But both sides, as it turns out, spent more time arguing than actually theorizing what was ostensibly the main focus of discussion; very few participants in the debate examined video games as they existed at the time. In fact, under scrutiny, this particular debate doesn’t feature many characteristics of a debate at all; it is, in fact, a true “wrangle” of discourse, featuring a variety of argumentative strategies (some of them questionable), different political goals, a range of influences from several scholarly discourses (including a reliance on the outmoded paradigm of film history explored in Interchapter Two), and, ultimately, all of the elements of a threshold of invisibility that I have posited here. This chapter is the longest in this dissertation, and demonstrates the value of the threshold of invisibility in sorting through these kinds of confusing critical exchanges.

Interchapter Three explores a long-standing issue in critical discourse: the contentious relationship between the image and the text, between icon and logos. The difference between the two is often treated as “obvious,” but connection between them is

complicated and loaded with a variety of cultural, social, and political forces. Taking Frederic Jameson's infamous line about the visual and pornography as a case study, the interchapter begins by examining the values and ideologies that orient perspectives on images and texts, with particular emphasis on the hierarchies of value that are erected as a result. The majority of the interchapter, however, focuses on the complex relations between image and text, with primary emphasis on the ground-breaking work of critic W.J.T. Mitchell. Ultimately, the "obvious" difference between text and image is not as neat as it seems, but, Mitchell provides some useful ideas to examine the two along with the discourse that tries to force them apart.

Finally, Chapter Four offers an alternative path, a different approach to analyzing discourse at a threshold of invisibility. Where Chapters Two and Three are full-fledged cases studies, deep (and lengthy) examinations of a broad representation of discourse at two specific thresholds of invisibility, Chapter Four approaches threshold discourse—specifically the discussion of incorporating multimodal composing practices in first-year writing courses—by tracing the influences and effects of terms deployed in the discussion. Some critics suggested that composition courses, in the interests of helping students communicate effectively in a multimodal world, should expand their practice from privileging writing instruction to including composing with audio, video, and other digital forms. Part of this move involved attempts to treat the rhetorical elements of the various modes. I track two key terms implemented in an attempt to do so, *affordance* and *constraint*, through a variety of contexts and into the discussions on multimodality in Composition studies. The terms, potentially, make up part of what might be called a

“rhetoric of multimodality,” or a generative conversation about what modes do and how we make meaning with (and from) them. But in the course of tracking the terms, it becomes clear that a variety of forces acting on the discussion—the typical threshold of invisibility wrangle of discourse—runs the risk of closing off the terms, of reducing them to concern with technical specifications that might reinforce the hierarchies of value that place some media above others. In short, this last chapter considers the potential effect of discourse at a threshold of invisibility on terms and concepts used in the classroom.

Overall, this series of examinations—the analysis of various thresholds in the chapters and the influence of concepts in the interchapters—offers a starting point, or a first effort, at focusing critical attention on the often unfocused scholarly discourse at these key moments of transition. At these moments, we can pick out the values, the ideologies, the terministic screens that inform and drive scholarly rhetorics. If, as Burke claims, a criticism of criticism can hash out the ways in which meaning is made through criticism, then the threshold of invisibility concept aims to discover that meaning and how it guides—and misguides—critics in their efforts to account for the new or unknown.

## Interchapter One: Relevant Rhetorical Theory

This interchapter considers some of the key ideas in rhetorical theory that make what Burke calls a “criticism of criticism” possible. The core ideas explored here are Burke’s *orientations/terministic screens* and *associational clusters* and Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *dissociation*. With orientations and terministic screens, Burke theorized a perspective on symbol use and discourse that examined the networks or textures of terms that made up particular perspectives. With associational clusters—a concept I will expand with the ideas of other thinkers such as I.A. Richards and Michael McGee—Burke suggested a way to think through how different terms within an orientation might relate to each other and be examined. With dissociation, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca proposed a model for how the meanings of and relationships between terms might be altered through argumentative reasoning. Taken together, these ideas offer a means to 1) identify the general rhetorical stance or perspective of scholars at a threshold of invisibility, 2) analyze the specific terms that make up these perspectives, and 3) examine the dynamics of change between terms—where they shift in meaning and importance—at moments of change in scholarly discourse. Exploring these ideas will allow for an illustration of the basis of the *threshold of invisibility* concept and means for examining critical discourse as it occurs at the moments of change at those thresholds.

Inevitably, any brief treatment of thinkers like Burke and Perelman will leave out considerable material, and my focus on some of their major concepts does not claim to be any different. Nevertheless, even this introduction to these ideas can provide a starting point, or the beginnings of the kind of criticism useful for examining thresholds of invisibility.

### **Orientations and Terministic Screens**

Burke's *Permanence and Change* (1935), written around the time of his "criticism of criticism" letter to Cowley, includes the working out of the "whole business of orientation" (Jay 206). Burke observes that

the very power of criticism has enabled man to build up cultural structures so complex that still greater powers of criticism are needed before he can distinguish between the food-processes and bait-processes concealed beneath his cultural tangles. His greater critical capacity has increased not only the range of his solutions but also the range of his problems. (*Permanence* 5-6)

Criticism thus has a dual nature, a means to "solve" problems and, ironically, a part of human culture and symbolic action that inevitably plays some role in the creation of those problems. In a sense, a criticism of criticism must acknowledge this dual nature. It might be said that Burke is *uncomfortable* with the overly comfortable finality of much social, literary, and political criticism. Concerned in particular with the influence of positivism, Burke felt that criticism should not attempt to merely generate and then finalize labels and terms to "deal" with problems, but rather to recognize that criticism has its own place in the nature of human symbol use.

*Permanence and Change* lays out an approach to the study of language and symbolic action that focuses primarily on the linguistic underpinnings of means selection, or how people generally approach and deal with issues and problems (or the actions that



people take when confronted with a new problem). Burke suggests that perspectives often derive from the accumulated linguistic experience of an individual's interactions, including the influence of the language of their community or background and the experience of dealing with subsequent situations and problems. These combine to form what Burke calls an "orientation," an accumulation of experience that influences (or even dictates) responses to current and future situations. Burke explains that the "character" of actions and events accumulate over time, creating an "interworking" system that results in an orientation; "it forms the basis of *expectancy* – for character telescopes the past, present, and future ... Orientation is thus a bundle of judgments as to how things were, how they are, and how they may be" (*Permanence* 14).

Starting with a number of animalistic metaphors—especially a fish encountering a baited hook—Burke explores the various factors that contribute to an organism's selection of means when faced with a new situation; narrowly escaping the hook, a fish will "think twice" about attempting to consume objects that appear similar to the bait encountered (*Permanence* 5).<sup>9</sup> Humans complicate the example somewhat with additional layers of critical reflection, which provide solutions as well as new problems. Due to this increased capacity for critical thought, humans can formulate orientations as schemes of interpretation, or an approach to situations they encounter within the context of symbolic structures. Human orientations still operate in terms of expectancy, though

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<sup>9</sup> Much of *Permanence* can be read as a critique of psychoanalytical approaches to social interactions, the conclusion of which, loosely, might be that psychoanalysis does not adequately account for the power of language in shaping (or constituting) the thoughts and social attitudes of individuals *and* groups. Burke therefore treats orientations, at least initially, in a fashion that might be considered psychological. But his emphasis attempts to account for the linguistic elements of motive, which, he claims, psychoanalysis fails to do.

some of that expectancy is governed by the language of the “groups” in which individuals are members.<sup>10</sup> For Burke, minds are

linguistic products...composed of concepts (verbally molded) which select certain relationships as meaningful. Other groups may select other relationships as meaningful. These relationships are not *realities*, they are *interpretations* of reality—hence different frameworks of interpretations will lead to different conclusions as to what reality is. (*Permanence* 35)

The kinds of relationships of “things happening” Burke posits are “in spite of,” “because of” and “regardless of” (*Permanence* 35-36). Different interpretations (orientations) “group” these happenings and relationships differently, so a question of causality (“because of”) from one orientation may be a question of irrelevancy or coincidence (“regardless of”) for another. Furthermore, orientations can shift to account for events differently, and thus “make for totally different pictures of reality since they focus the attention upon different orders of relationship” (*Permanence* 36). The means by which orientations change and develop is rooted in these relationships, and—far from being locked into the orientation derived solely from background—individuals can alter their own orientations:

We learn to single out certain relationships in accordance with the particular linguistic texture into which we are born, though we may privately manipulate this linguistic texture to formulate still other relationships. When we do so, we invent new terms, or apply our old vocabulary in new ways, attempting to socialize our position by so manipulating the linguistic equipment of our group that our particular additions or alterations can be shown to fit into the old texture. (*Permanence* 36)

Alteration of orientations, therefore, is possible through manipulation of the “textures” that denote relationships. Though their development and evolution is possible, the

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of discourse community is particularly relevant here.

process is clearly one that advances relatively slowly, and, crucially, is geared in part towards fitting “new” ideas into the “old texture.” This is a process of updating rather than large scale paradigm shifting, and underscores just how necessary orientations are in shaping means selection.

Simply put, means selection encompasses the choices or actions carried out by an individual in response to new stimuli—such as a fish hook. The means selected are the actions undertaken in reaction to the situation (what we “do about it”). Normally, means are selected on the basis of positive or desirable outcomes—the fish, having felt the hook, may hesitate to approach the same kind of bait, or any food that resembles it, in the future. This simple example is a good model: the fish has selected a new means of gathering food that accounts for past experience. Of course, humans are more complicated. Orientations influence or even dictate means selection, so adherence to a certain orientation (regardless of how it has been manipulated or changed over time) will shape how someone reacts or approaches any symbolic engagement, old or new. But the reaction as dictated by the orientation may likely be effective or ineffective means selection. Burke observes that

[t]he problems of existence do not have one fixed, unchanging character, like the label on the bottle. They are open to many interpretations – and these interpretations in turn influence our selection of means ... One adopts measures in keeping with his past training – and the very soundness of this training may lead him to adopt the wrong measures. (*Permanence* 10)

Take, for instance, the psychological conditioning most commonly associated with Pavlov. If a particular bell ringing is used to condition chickens to gather for feeding, then when the bell is rung the chickens will come running, regardless of whether they’ve been called to dinner or to the slaughter (Burke *Permanence* 6). This is an example of

“trained incapacity” (Thorstein Veblen’s term), and illustrates the problems inherent in orientations; adherence to one orientation, based as it is on experience, is often insufficient to meet new situations and can potentially lead to conflict.

Scholars are less than likely to be led to the slaughter on account of new critical situations, but just as criticism has supplied solutions as well as new problems, human orientations complicate responses to new situations precisely because of the accumulated symbolic structures that address and create problems. The issue is one of accumulation:

If people persist longer than chickens in faulty orientation despite punishment, it is because the greater complexity of their problems, the vast network of mutually sustaining values and judgments, makes it more difficult for them to perceive the nature of the re-orientation required, and to select their means accordingly. (*Permanence* 23)

A number of features play into this issue, as differing, conflicting orientations can confuse the necessary approaches to deal with problems; the problems themselves are not necessarily universal, and proposed solutions, or correct means selections, for one group may be incorrect for another. The more complicated, interrelated sets of problems—beyond a fish hook and a dinner bell—create a situation in which people are still

the victims of a trained incapacity, since the very authority of their earlier ways interferes with the adoption of new ones. And this difficulty is increased by the fact that, even when a practice is socially dangerous, it may be individually advantageous, as with the individuals who reap profits from a jingoism resulting in great misery to the group. (*Permanence* 23)

This particular quality of orientations, the shaping of means selection both adequate and inadequate, productive and problematic, is the central element of an examination of discourse at and around the threshold of invisibility—what do scholars *do* and *say* when confronted with new situations?

Answering that question is a major focus of this dissertation, and, as I've suggested above, much of the work here emphasizes the terms of that discourse. This approach stems, in part, from the development of Burke's own thinking on orientations in his later work, where the idea developed into the more commonly known concept of the terministic screen. I've already defined terministic screens (in Chapter One), but some discussion here of the core idea might be useful going forward.

Burke's treatment of the terministic screen concept comes after his "formal" grammar of dramatism, meaning the idea has significant developments in light of his work following *Permanence and Change*. Some of these developments—like the different terms for types of meanings—I will discuss below, but the significant shift is one from a model derived and in direct discussion with psychology to one anchored primarily and explicitly in the use of terms. This is most readily apparent in Burke's comments on how terms direct the *attention*. As I discussed in Chapter One, the terms used—books on physics or law, for instance—end up influencing resultant conversation. More profoundly, however, Burke suggests that any "observations" we make on a topic "*are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made*. In brief, much that we take as observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms" (Burke, *Language* 46). Rather, what we have to say about something might very well follow from an already established set of terms. For instance, Burke points to the key term in theology, "God," as the term from which all other terms arise,<sup>11</sup> quite literally, in fact, as God appears in the

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<sup>11</sup> As a result of this relationship, Burke elsewhere refers to these kinds of terms as "God terms."

first sentence of the Bible and everything necessarily follows (*Language* 46). The observations made using this terminology, therefore, are always in terms of God, and this could not be otherwise, as the implicit assumption is that all things are only possible in these terms. The same goes for secular terminologies. Whether the God-term is “science” or “objectivity” or any number of philosophical terms, all terminologies rooted in those terms will assume, implicitly, that said terms can encompass everything. “Reality,” then, is always defined by terms and, crucially, the qualities already implicit in terminologies. The idea of terms being continuous or discontinuous, or “terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart,” follows from this idea (*Language* 49).<sup>12</sup>

Terministic screens can be differentiated, then, by their terms, most notably the God-terms, and the choices made in regard to continuity and discontinuity, what follows or does not follow from the starting point (the God-term). Examining these components of any screen or perspective will ultimately allow them to be placed in conversation with each other, or how terms work in a sort of ecology of influence, is a process that necessitates a little more discussion here.

### **Semantic/Poetic Meanings and Associational Clusters**

While orientations/terministic screens provide a holistic view of symbol use,<sup>13</sup> Burke devotes considerable space throughout his work to the functions and meanings of

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<sup>12</sup> See the discussion of continuity and discontinuity in Chapter One.

<sup>13</sup> Or perhaps two versions of a holistic view. As their respective appearances demonstrate—orientation in an early work (1935) and terministic screen in a later one (1966)—Burke worked with this idea in many iterations during his career.

terms that make up these larger structures. Two concepts are worth considering here: Burke's differentiation between "semantic" and "poetic" meanings, and the function of terms in association, or "associational clusters."

In *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), Burke sets out, in part, to critique (and, ultimately, reject) the positivistic premise of a "neutral" language or terminology. "Neutral" terminologies tending toward what Burke called the "semantic ideal" would attempt to remove ambiguity, to impose a totalizing "correct" meaning on all terms at the expense of the associational (and, for Burke) moral qualities of terms and their referents. For Burke, such terminologies were both incomplete and ethically problematic, which led him to draw a distinction between what he labels "semantic" meaning, or the use of language for strictly definitional purposes, and "poetic" meaning, which is characterized by "encompassing" the meanings of a term in the contexts in which it resides.

"Semantic" meaning entails a descriptive, "objectively" scientific approach to language.<sup>14</sup> Such a terminology deals primarily in descriptive naming and labeling. The semantic ideal, or the project of semantic terminologies and their originators, is, in Burke's estimate, an "aim to evolve a vocabulary that gives the name and address of

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<sup>14</sup> By the time Burke had coined the term terministic screen in *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966), however, the concepts of poetic and semantic meanings (discussed in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 1941) are renamed "dramatistic" and "scientific" meanings, respectively. "Scientific" meaning remains concerned with "questions of naming, or definition" while a "dramatistic" meaning stresses "language as an aspect of 'action,' that is, as 'symbolic action,'" adopting the terms (action and symbolic action) so important in Burke's middle and later work (*Language* 44). The change in terms to "dramatistic" and "scientific" is a continuation Burke's career-long "fight" against positivism, particularly the implicit and unquestioned adherence to a positivist-like view. Burke's approach, attacking kinds of meaning as opposed to individuals, reflects the nature of the issue; that the implicit features of positivism were a far more common than actual, self-avowed adherents of the approach. Burke quipped in a 1947 letter to Cowley that "Positivists, in the formal sense, are not very ubiquitous enemies. But positivism, in the half-assed sense, is all about us, and thus is properly one of my major concerns" (Jay 277). Similar concerns motivate Richards' critique of what he calls the "Proper Meaning Superstition," which I will discuss below.

*every event in the universe*” (*Philosophy* 141, italics in original). For Burke, this approach is effective in narrowing the field to identify one of some billions of people on earth (or the segment of population, at least, that has access to a postal service). And in this regard, semantic naming seems to fulfill its function adequately and accurately. To successfully send a letter, say, to John Doe at his address using terms set forth by a semantic approach would definitively show that the terminology adequately described John Doe’s name and physical location. Burke does not necessarily challenge these qualities of semantic meaning. An issue arises, however, when attempts are made to extend the semantic meaning of the term “John Doe” beyond a label and point in space.

Though a letter may find John Doe at his address, the semantic terminology used to direct that letter will, according to Burke, inevitably fail to capture or adequately describe the individual’s essence. There are a number of “meanings” to John Doe as an individual that are not, obviously, captured in his name and address. Burke expands the meaning of “John Doe” to include the meaning of the term to, say, his wife, his boss, his employees, and so on. These qualities are outside the effective range of a semantic meaning, or rather they are not neatly enclosed within it, for Burke claims that:

[Even] though this kind of meaning *impinges* upon semantic meaning, it cannot be encompassed with perfect fidelity to the *semantic ideal*. You can’t give the names and addresses of all the subtle significances. There is no organization like the Postal Service or the laboratory or the factory, with a set of pearly interlocking functions. (*Philosophy* 142-143)

Burke calls this kind of collection of “subtle significances” a poetic meaning.

Poetic meanings, unlike semantic ones, cannot be gauged by a description dependent on an evaluation of truth or falsity. This arises from a tendency to invest “meaning” with an implicit charge of “correct meaning,” which is generally one of two



ways that term is used or treated in discussion (the other being “any meaning”). Burke observes that the former charge of the term, “correct meaning,” “leads to an either-or approach” that excludes, among other things, the possibility of the “accuracy” of figurative language (*Philosophy* 144). Burke’s example phrase, “New York City is in Iowa,” illustrates the distinction nicely. By the semantic approach, “New York City is in Iowa” may be quickly and definitively determined “inaccurate,” given that the statement does not accurately describe the situation of either geographical referent; it is, in short, a false statement. But the phrase has considerably more “meaning” than whether or not it is an accurate statement—while New York City does not physically exist in Iowa, use of the phrase figuratively would not produce the same definitive rejection of meaning. Used to indicate the prevalence of railroads or perhaps areas of heavy industry in Iowa, the statement takes on another (or several other) charged meanings. For Burke, “‘New York City is in Iowa’ is ‘poetically’ true. As a metaphor, it provides valid insight. To have ruled it out, by strict semantic authority would have been vandalism” (*Philosophy* 144). While “vandalism” here seems a strong choice of words, it captures, at least partially, Burke’s objections to the semantic ideal’s tendencies, namely, to reject or remove the possibility of meaning through an “either-or” or “true-false” dichotomy.

The primary issue with semantic meaning, then, is its partial quality, and Burke suggests poetic meaning as a more useful means to capture the range of meanings, implicit and explicit, that terms may take on not only as descriptions but as expressions of attitudes and motives in human symbolic action. Tracking down this range of meanings

necessarily requires an inclusive (“all” meanings), rather than exclusive (“correct” meanings), approach. As in the case of “New York City is in Iowa:”

‘Poetic’ meanings...cannot be disposed of on the true-or-false basis. Rather, they are related to one another like a set of concentric circles, of wider and wider scope. Those of wider diameter do not categorically eliminate those of narrower diameter. There is, rather, a progressive *encompassment*. (*Philosophy* 144)

A poetic meaning would attempt to “encompass” the various meanings of a term beyond its name. A name (and/or address), along with a test for the accuracy of the label, for Burke, describes but one aspect of the thing named, and should not be deployed (as the semantic ideal would) as a full description of that thing. The subsequent elements encompassed by a poetic meaning provide a more holistic picture of the term defined. For Burke, the wider and wider concentric circles are critical both in terms of explaining poetic meaning and for considering the department of terms and meaning in symbolic interactions (the concept, later labeled as “circumference,” is critical for dramatism).

The partial, or fragmentary, meanings derived from a semantic approach do not provide the full import and effect of a term but rather merely attempt to objectively describe its essence, and for Burke this creates a problem with moral implications. The supposed “neutrality” of semantic meaning can, if taken as a totality rather than a fragment, misname—or defer the meaning of—the thing defined. The semantic ideal’s neutrality is a systematic removal of elements that make up terms, an “attempt to *get a description* by the *elimination* of attitude...to *cut away*, to *abstract*, all emotional factors that complicate the objective clarity of meaning” (*Philosophy* 147-148). By this formulation, a “nonmoral” system of terms is an intentional reduction that claims to be a fully realized expression of a totality. It is important to note that Burke does not believe

that semantic naming is without value; on the contrary, he does point to its usefulness within certain terminological sets (within the sciences, for instance), but he objects to its application to social phenomena that are based not on the interaction of physical or biological forces or systems, but rather the intersection of *motivated* symbolic actions undertaken by people (*Philosophy* 165). Indeed, the “neutralization” of the social in terms of the scientific can only lead to trained incapacity (a key problem with orientations, as discussed above) (*Philosophy* 165).

Poetic meanings, however, contain all possible elements at the time of utterance.

Rather than strip away emotion,

the poetic ideal would attempt to *attain a full moral act* by attaining a perspective *atop all the conflicts of attitude*...to derive its vision from the maximum *heaping up* of all these emotional factors, playing them off against one another, inviting them to reinforce and contradict one another, and seeking to make this active participation itself a major ingredient of the vision. (*Philosophy* 148)

All of the concentric circles and the “heaps” of emotion that go into a poetic meaning are therefore indicative not only of what the thing “is” but *what we can do with it*, that is, how it fits into a larger context of attitudes “toward” the thing. This is expressed specifically at the moment—Burke’s own colorful example holds that “to call a man a son-of-a-bitch is symbolically to make a complete assertion of attitude towards him now; it is itself a culmination, a ‘total summing up’” (*Philosophy* 149). Regardless of its somewhat profane character, this particular poetic label thus encompasses a larger “meaning” of the individual than “John Doe” would. That is not to say this meaning is complete—after all, the man’s family may not think he is a “son-of-a-bitch”—but in conjunction with other assertions (say, he’s a “nice guy”), it forms a more encompassing reflection of attitudes present in this particular situation.

Crucially, this poetic meaning expresses an attitude that is not only present at the time but stylistically shapes the nature of utterances surrounding the thing (or person) and the moments in which those utterances occur. To take on the “style” of calling someone a pejorative name or dismissing them (by saying, for instance, “faugh”) is to “pledge...to one program”:

The style selected will mold the character of the selector. Each brand of imagery contains in germ its own ‘logic.’ If he says ‘faugh’ and deeply means it, he thereby *vows* himself to ‘faugh’; he must go *through* the faughness, until he has either persisted by the buttressing of his choice or has burned it out. (*Philosophy* 148)

A poetic meaning is not just a transitory feel that did not exist prior to its utterance and that dissipates immediately thereafter (no “flash in the pan”), but rather an expression of an attitude in the situation and the commitment to hold that attitude into the future, or rather, the utterance contains, to a degree, the past, present, and potential future. Put another way, the semantic approach removes or ignores a synchronic meaning in favor of a deferred diachronic meaning, specifically a “promissory” or potential meaning. The poetic approach, on the other hand, embraces the intersection of diachronic and a full synchronic meaning, being a complete expression of the term *now* and a commitment to that expression moving forward. Since terms *in isolation* hint only at a partial meaning or a cutting away of meaning, the *association* of terms, the heaping of meaning and broadening circles of the poetic (or dramatic), becomes vital for considering the deep structures or the makeup of a terministic screen. To get at this idea, Burke coined the phrase “associational clusters.”

“Associational clusters” are groups of terms or phrases that, when treated in connection with each other, can uncover the specific situation in which a writer

composes, and the effect that that situation (and the corresponding strategy) has for the writer and the reader (these are not necessarily the same). The clusters are, in the work of every writer, a system of relationships that allow for connections to be drawn to motives. In this way, various terms have synecdochic functions, often standing in for or representing different terms, and these relationships form a core part of the writer's work. Burke goes so far as to suggest that the synecdoche may be the "'basic' figure of speech, and that it occurs in many modes besides that of the formal trope" (*Philosophy* 26). Consideration of associational clusters requires a more expansive view of the synecdoche. So, instead of the "simple" use of the figure—the part stands in the whole ("all hands on deck" rather than all crew members on deck)—synecdoche in a cluster approach would function as a network of representations, as a base concept for the interrelationships between terms. Clusters can be identified as sets of "inclusive equations," that, under examination, can reveal "'what goes with what' in these clusters – what kinds of acts and images and personalities and situations go with [a writer's] notions of heroism, villainy, consolation, despair, etc.'" (*Philosophy* 20). Finding these clusters in an author's work is akin to a "statistical" analysis of the inclusive equations, which equates to finding, say, the collection of images in a poem (which is actually Burke's primary example) or the connections between terms and ideas in an essay (Burke, *Philosophy* 29-30).<sup>15</sup>

Associational clusters more generally apply to the uses of words, or "the fact that no one quite uses the word in its mere dictionary sense. And the overtones of a usage are

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<sup>15</sup> Burke's use of "statistical" here speaks to his attempt to move away from the discomfort surrounding the term "symbolic." Obviously, this anxiety was not an issue in his later work.

revealed ‘by the company it keeps’ in the utterances of a given speaker or writer” (*Philosophy* 35). When certain terms are used, they are inevitably connected to other terms used in conjunction (the company they keep). Each term associates with other terms, and can become “loaded” with the significance of the others, which requires the tracking down of the elements of each equation. Burke likens this relationship to a heading, or title, and contents; “The ‘symbolic’ attribute is like the title of a chapter; the particulars are like the details that fill out a chapter. The title is a kind of ‘first approximation’; the detail filling-out a kind of ‘closer approximation’” (*Philosophy* 35). In short, selection of a term can allow for an examination of the equation of which it is a part. In addition, the “statistical” approach also considers other works by the same author, allowing for trends to emerge that can be tied together as a set of similar (or identical) equations, and thus expose the terministic construction of the writer’s orientation. “What goes with what,” then, offers insight into the full symbolic structure of an orientation by means of association. Clusters of terms, then, make up part of the terministic screen of a particular thinker or writer, and the relationships among the clusters, like the pentadic ratios discussed in Chapter One, are one of the many ways that Burke attempted to account for motivated symbolic action.

### **Motive, Interanimation, and Ideographs**

The question of motive opens up the focus of this interchapter to include thinking from a number of rhetorical theorists. How words function together, and what information that provides for the analysis of a thinker or writer, is, naturally, a key concern for rhetorical theory. For Burke, associational clusters and the “filling out of

meaning” by examining the equations of a writer’s work (much like the extensive requirements of defining a poetic meaning) allows for an uncovering of motive based in the interrelationships of terms, for

[t]he interrelationships themselves *are* [the writer’s] motives. For they are his *situation*; and *situation* is but another word for *motives*. The motivation out of which he writes is synonymous with the structural way in which he puts events and values together when he writes. (*Philosophy* 20)

From this particular view—of situations and motives—we can focus on two key points, both in Burke’s work and the work of others. First, *motive*, in this sense, is not instrumental (in the sense of being motivated to accomplish a particular goal), but rather an attempt to explain how and why people interact in certain ways, which leads to the second point, that use of language is critical in discerning the function of those interactions.

Burke suggests that accumulation of symbolic interactions leads to linguistic perspectives—orientations or terministic screens—that we might “get at” by looking at the clusters of terms that make them up. Orientations and terministic screens *function* in such a way as to influence how people approach new interactions; the response to something new is shaped (for better or worse) by the accumulated symbolic baggage of expectancy—what has happened or been said in the past—such that what is said about the new interaction is implicit in that baggage. When Burke discusses *situation*, then, this is the general sense in which he does so. *Motive*, as a term, became central in his later work—as exemplified by *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) and *A Rhetoric of Motives*

(1950)—but the idea is grounded, situated, in the early works and finds expression through a number of interrelated ideas.<sup>16</sup>

Burke's concern with meanings—semantic and poetic—and the use of terms in clusters speaks to a common concern among twentieth century rhetoricians. I.A. Richards, for example, also argues against a particular approach to language and meaning as “fixed.” For Richards, a common approach to language and meaning has been to mistakenly assume that words have but one, fixed meaning, a tendency he labels the “Proper Meaning Superstition” (11). Richards suggests that this superstition has been in place since the seventeenth century and has, in effect, caused highly technical language—as in the sciences, where terms do, indeed, required specific and fixed meanings—to be taken for the norm rather than as the exception (48). To counter the superstition, then, Richards proposes a renewed, revitalized approach to rhetoric that is sensitive to the different meanings words have in different contexts—the “Context Theorem of Meaning”—part of which involves acknowledging the different meanings provided to words by their proximity to other words, or “interanimation” (38, 70). Like Burke's poetic meanings, Richards' interanimation has words drawing their meaning from their context and from other words, even words that are not present in the utterance but exert some force in other contexts (65).

However, to avoid the limits of either rhetorician (Burke or Richards), specifically their exclusive focus on the symbolic, we might consider Michael McGee's “ideograph”

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<sup>16</sup> As Ross Wolin notes, it is important to consider the full range of Burke's work, especially his early texts, in order to capture the full implications of his criticism—many scholars focus more on the later works, especially *A Grammar of Motives* and *A Rhetoric of Motives* to the detriment of the earlier work, thus ignoring a progression of thinking that continues through, not culminates in, these later texts (Wolin 6).



concept. As McGee argues in his seminal article “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology,” an issue in contemporary (1980) rhetorical study was the treatment of the term and concept of “ideology.” McGee posits a divide between “symbolists” like Burke and “materialists” like thinkers in the neo-Marxist schools in their treatment of a “brute undeniable phenomenon: Human beings in collectivity behave and think differently than human beings in isolation” (2). Both schools of thinkers essentially (and rightly) reject the idea of a “true” mass consciousness, and instead propose different views of the function of collective thought. Symbolists suggest “voluntary agreements to believe in and to participate in a ‘myth.’ Materialists maintain that the trick is an insidious, reified form of ‘lie,’ a self-perpetuating system of beliefs and interpretations foisted on all members of the community by the ruling class” (2). McGee groups Burke with the symbolists, and suggests that his focus on motive ignores “the objective conditions that impinge on and restrict the individual’s freedom to develop a political consciousness” (2). But while this is a shortcoming, McGee sees no “error” in these two views, given the difference in focus and goals of each group. Indeed, shortcomings arise as symbolists and materialists each neglect what the other emphasizes: materialists often don’t consider language studies, and symbolists don’t consider the non-symbolic environment and material phenomena (McGee 3).

McGee posits that ideology is present in discourse—that is, people enact dominant ideology through language usage. In this view,

ideology in practice is a political language, preserved in rhetorical documents, with the capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior. Further, the political language which manifests ideology seems characterized by

slogans, a vocabulary of ‘ideographs’ easily mistaken for the technical terminology of political philosophy. (McGee 5)

The essence of political language is persuasive, and ideographs persuasively activate ideological commitments, moving everyone in a certain direction as part of a “rhetoric of control” utilized to shape opinions of a community (McGee 6). McGee points to words like “equality” and “liberty,” words that hold unquestionable value in most democratic societies, as examples of ideographs that, when evoked, restrict resistance; explicit arguments against “equality” or “liberty” are not generally tolerated. As ideographs, these “slogans,” not unlike God-terms (which McGee uses in part to explain the concept), both constitute and state the ideological underpinnings of democratic systems.

Ideographs do not necessarily lead to a populace with a monolithic ideology.

While few would argue *against* liberty, equality, and so on, disagreements about the meaning of those ideographs does cause some division:

[T]here are special interests within the United States separated one from the other precisely by disagreements regarding the identity, legitimacy, or definition of ideographs. So we are divided by usages into subgroups: Business and labor, Democrats and Republicans, Yankees and Southerners are *united* by the ideographs that represent the political entity 'United States' and *separated* by a disagreement as to the practical meaning of such ideographs. (McGee 8)

In a way, these sub-divisions of ideology mirror some of the associational qualities of terms that Burke speaks to. Even given a particular valued term—a God term such as “equality”—there can be considerable variance in meaning and application. In short, there’s value in considering the circumference, or the various concentric circles of meaning, with terms in general and ideographs in particular.

Like McGee, I see value in connecting, in supplementing, different views of rhetorical and political practice. While scholarly discourse and modern political rhetoric

are not, by definition, the same creature, scholarly discourse is, given its situation, subject to a number of rhetorical and political pressures. As such, my examination of the makeup of critical discourse combines elements of Burke's associational clusters and McGee's ideographs in order to "get at" the makeup and function of critical orientations.

### **Dissociation and the Argumentative Interplay of Terms**

The ideas of associational clusters and ideographs allow for analysis of terministic screens through examination of the associations and usages of key terms used by scholars as they navigate thresholds of invisibility, and much of the work of this dissertation will rely on getting to the "root" of the use of terms. But reasoning and argumentation in scholarly rhetorics are complicated and dynamic at moments of change, and therefore we need analytical tools that allow for examination of both the relationships between terms and how those relationships might alter at a threshold of invisibility. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca offer such an approach in their landmark treatise on argumentation and reasoning, *The New Rhetoric*—the process they call "dissociation."

Dissociation involves separating, disuniting, or modifying the relationship between two terms or notions—a pairing—in order to generate a new conceptual relationship or apparatus for the solving of a (usually philosophical) problem (190, 414). We can find this kind of "problem" at a threshold of invisibility, where scholars attempt to account for new situations with old terms, where the old and new therefore collide. In Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's description of dissociation, this collision arises from an incompatibility, and dissociation "involves a . . . change that is always prompted by the desire to remove an incompatibility arising out of the confrontation of one proposition

with others, whether one is dealing with forms, facts, or truths” (413). Dissociation allows for what might be called a reconciliation between opposing or incompatible propositions by means of re-arranging their relation in the context of a particular conceptual structure. In other words, dissociation is a means for establishing a new philosophical system by rearranging the relations of component concepts that, in previous philosophical systems, were contradictory:

[On the] practical level, the dissociation of notions amounts to a compromise, but, on the theoretical level, it leads to a solution that will also be valid for the future, because, by remodeling our conception of reality, it prevents the reappearance of the same incompatibility. It preserves, at least partially, the incompatible elements. (413)

A productive comparison might be drawn to Burke’s circumference in dramatism or the concentric circles of meaning in poetic meanings. Dissociation functions as a purposeful re-drawing of the bounds of the circumference, a move to a different concentric circle, specifically by using a guiding term to reconcile the incompatibilities of (or within) another term.

The usefulness of dissociation as both argumentative process and key for analysis of discursive practices lies in the mechanics of the process of itself, or the relations between terms that exhibit the kind of shift in thinking that allows new philosophical systems to come into use. The core of dissociation is the two terms, the “pair,” at the center of process. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca labels these two notions, appropriately enough, as “term I” and “term II,” and their relation can be show visually as follows:

term I



term II

For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, the prototypical pairing of terms is the “appearance-reality” pair, as this set of terms is both widely used and important for most philosophical systems (415). The pair appears, as in the basic visual representation, as such:

appearance



reality

The appearance-reality pair models a great number of the relations between terms I and II. First and foremost, this prototype allows for the basic relation between the two terms to become clear, as “the need to distinguish appearance from reality arises out of certain difficulties, certain incompatibilities between appearances; these could no longer all be regarded as expressing reality, if one makes the hypothesis that all aspects of the real are mutually compatible” (415-416). Competing appearances must in some way be reconciled by reality. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca use as an example a stick partially submerged in water; it “appears” to be both curved (visually) and straight (by touch), but in reality can’t be both (416). The use of “reality” as a corrective to these competing appearances prevents adoption of the mistaken observation; “while appearances can be opposed to each other, reality is coherent: the effect of determining reality is to dissociate those appearances that are deceptive from those that correspond to reality” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 416). In this way, reality is a means to properly frame the various components of appearance and sort them out appropriately.

In general, the appearance-reality pair corresponds to the types of relations between most pairs in the process of dissociation. Reality can, in many cases, be equated to any term II, whereas appearance corresponds to term I:

Term II provides a criterion, a norm which allows us to distinguish those aspects of term I which are of value from those which are not; it is not simply a datum, it is a *construction* which, during the dissociation of term I, establishes a rule that makes it possible to classify the multiple aspects of term I in a hierarchy. It enables those that do not correspond to the rule which *reality* provides to be termed illusory, erroneous, or apparent (in the depreciatory sense of this word). In relation to term I, term II is both normative and explanatory. After the dissociation has been made, term II makes it possible to retain or to disqualify the various aspects under which term I is presented. It makes it possible to distinguish, out of a number of appearances of doubtful status, those which are merely appearance and those which represent reality. (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 416-417)

In short, term II provides a normative criteria, the basis for a particular philosophical system or perspective, and term I must be reconfigured, restructured, or reframed by means of this criteria so as to eliminate its incompatibilities. This can be either a process of parsing out, where certain aspects of term I are eliminated or hierarchized, or it can also be a more or less total rejection, where the “reality” of term II renders term I “illusory” in its entirety. The basic premise holds across examples and different philosophical doctrines, each of which have their own pairs, “term II of which indicates what serves as a criterion of value, whereas term I indicates that which does not satisfy this criterion” (441). In each case of dissociation, term II is the dominant, or privileged term in the respective doctrine, while term I is the term to be interrogated or reframed as guided by the qualities of term II.

Dissociation frequently plays out in critical discourse at and around the use definitions. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, “definition is an instrument of quasi-

logical argumentation. It is also an instrument of the dissociation of concepts, more especially whenever it claims to furnish the real, true meaning of the concept as opposed to its customary or apparent usage” (444). When a scholar encounters a new form or media—a new situation—for instance, he or she may present a technical definition to differentiate the scholar’s work from customary parlance. When this is the case, when “the technical concept and the customary concept are confronted, one of them – the one that counts for the audience being addressed – may assume the role of term II in relation to the other. Generally, it will be the technical term which enjoys this privilege” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 447). The technical definition, then, becomes a term II to the customary meaning’s term I. A useful example may be found in the study of narrative, where narratologists present a rigorous and technical set of definitions of narrative in opposition to—or, more precisely, in order to achieve a great specificity than—customary, amorphous meanings of “story.”

An examination of dissociations in critical discourse can help to uncover the terministic grounds from which they proceed. The use of dissociation, I would argue, is common at thresholds of invisibility, where new ideas challenge a discipline’s bounds, possibly expanding the borders of that discipline as arguments alter its orientation or terministic screen. While this is not necessarily a move toward a “new” philosophical doctrine, it is—ostensibly—a move towards a new perspective for that discipline. Discursively, this is not dissimilar from establishing a new philosophical frame, based, as such frames often are, in relation to a previous one. This process, for Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, “presupposes the working out of a conceptual apparatus, at least part of

which, that which is fundamentally original, results from a dissociation of notions that enables the problems the philosopher has set himself to be solved” (414). A parallel can here be drawn, once again, to Kuhn’s paradigm shifts: arguments for changing orientations require considerable effort, but once made and accepted, they are almost “obvious.” The same is true of dissociation:

At the theoretical level, it is the compromise solution to incompatibilities which calls for the greatest effort and is most difficult to justify because it requires a new structuration of reality. On the other hand, once it is established, once the concepts have been dissociated and restructured, compromise tends to appear as the inescapable solution and to react on the aggregate of concepts into which it is inserted. (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 415)

Dissociation, in this sense, is as much of a transitional moment as a scientific revolution or a conversion event. Prior to a threshold of invisibility, dissociation is a considerable undertaking, but afterwards it has so changed the basic grounds of the orientation that it appears obvious, even eternally so. What this should also demonstrate, as I mention above, is that dissociation is both a process carried out in discourse and an analytical model for examining that discourse. In general, dissociation might be said to occur whenever a term is used as a corrective to another term or where one idea is used as a way to re-think another. In short, dissociation occurs frequently in critical discourse, especially, I would argue, at the intersection of perspectives found in the vicinity of a threshold of invisibility—the “moving parts” of discourse, the conflicting or divergent terministic screens at those moments.

These collected approaches—of Burke, McGee, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca—as a means to practice a criticism of criticism. In the chapters that follow, I will examine several key thresholds of invisibility and use the analytical frames put forth in



this interchapter to get at the terms that make up the orientations of critical discourse converging at those moments, how those terms relate and draw meaning from each other, and how those relationships change through argumentation.

## Chapter Two: Digital Images and the Death (and Life) of Photography

In a 2012 talk on the “Limits of Photography” at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, W.J.T. Mitchell—the media and visual culture scholar and long-time editor of *Critical Inquiry*—quipped that he had often been confused with another thinker, had been “accused of writing” or “complimented on” the books of William J. Mitchell, the late architect and dean of MIT’s School of Architecture and Planning (“WJT Mitchell Lecture”).<sup>17</sup> The confusion arose in part because of the similarity of the names, but also due to the similarity of their interests—in digital images, optical technologies, and other related areas. But the similarities between the two Mitchells do not run particularly deep, and W.J.T. Mitchell takes the extensive differences in outlook as the basis for his talk.

For W.J.T. Mitchell, William Mitchell’s 1992 text *The Reconfigured Eye* was, “throughout the 90s...*the* book on new visual media, new optical technologies, and particularly on the question of the digital image” (“WJT Mitchell Lecture”). For both Mitchells, the core question seems to be “what does digital imaging *do* to photography?” Their answers, at least as W.J.T. Mitchell describes them, are in opposition. The main

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<sup>17</sup> The confusion was not, it seems, relegated to casual conversation. In their 2009 *Visual Communication* article “Digital Cameras and Domestic Photography: Communication, Agency, and Structure,” Paul Cobley and Nick Haeffner incorrectly document W.J.T. Mitchell as having authored both *What Pictures Want* (2005)—which he did write—and William J. Mitchell’s *The Reconfigured Eye* (1992)—which he did not.

point of departure is a statement in *The Reconfigured Eye*, where William Mitchell claims that, due to the rise of digital imaging and computer manipulation, “[t]he currency of the bank of nature has left the gold standard: images are no longer guaranteed as visual truth—even as signifiers with stable meaning and value—and we endlessly print more of them” (57).<sup>18</sup> William Mitchell’s concern, as summarized by W.J.T. Mitchell, is that the “digital revolution” served to separate photography from its “traditional source of truth and value...[its] adherence to the referent, the indexical character of chemical based photography” (“WJT Mitchell Lecture”). For W.J.T. Mitchell, the difference between chemical and digital photography is not so pronounced—photography, in general, does not guarantee truth, and digital photography does not sever that connection (between the photograph and truth). Indeed, W.J.T. Mitchell claims that “truth conditions” still exist in digital photography in much same way that truth conditions existed for chemical photography. The famous “fake” photograph of nineteenth century Zionist Theodor Herzl meeting the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, illustrates the point nicely. The photograph is a composite, assembled in the darkroom, to show the two historical figures meeting. On that level, says W.J.T.Mitchell, the photograph “lies,” but, in reality, the two men did meet, and it probably looked something like it did in the photograph, making it, on another level, “perfectly true” (“WJT Mitchell Lecture”). Ultimately, W.J.T. Mitchell does not see the continuity break in photographic practice (or thinking) that William Mitchell proposes; though some changes are definite—the work of the darkroom is now

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<sup>18</sup> Also quoted, verbatim, in W.J.T Mitchell’s talk (“WJT Mitchell Lecture”).

done on the computer desktop—truth, for W.J.T. Mitchell, is not the essential quality of photography that William Mitchell claims.

This particular instance of disagreement about identity, both between similarly named theorists and on the larger issues of photographic “truth,” speaks to a general set of disagreements in and around the issue of the digital in photographic practice. In this particular instance, I would argue that the discourse on digital imaging and computer media—and their ramifications for photography and photographic culture—around the late 1980s and early 1990s constitutes a threshold of invisibility, one that offers a particularly pronounced case of terministic screens conflicting over questions of continuity and discontinuity and prominently exhibits two of the “features” I discussed in Chapter One: *narrativization(s)* to contextualize the moment of transition and some kind of *barrier to communication*.<sup>19</sup>

I’ve suggested that thresholds of invisibility are characterized by apparent divisions between terministic screens; that is, they occur at a moment when scholars committed to differing orientations struggle to communicate across those differences. Some of the differences in opinion over the ramifications of digital photography illustrate this type of colliding orientations quite directly, and they do so, in part, with the very terms Burke uses to distinguish different terministic screens. A core component of the idea of Burke’s terministic screens, as I discussed in Chapter One and Interchapter One,

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<sup>19</sup> See the discussion of these elements in Chapter One. My full definition of threshold of invisibility is as follows: *a complex of discursive practices or symbolic interaction where there is apparent division between adherence to different linguistic orientations toward a technology, medium, or formal concept.*

is the two sets of terms, “terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart,” or strive toward continuity or discontinuity (Burke, *Language* 49).

This particular division is evident—explicitly so—in arguments over digital photography, where many writers argued that the digital image marked a clear break, an end (even a “death”) of photography and the beginning of something new. Still others argued that digital photography, like any of the many technological changes and advancements throughout photography’s history, promised no essential break in the continuity of that history. These competing views, I would argue, display one of the features of thresholds of invisibility: competing *narrativizations* of photography’s history and identity, some of which reach far into the past, back even to the invention of photography, in an effort to contextualize their arguments about the present. The other key feature of this threshold, a *barrier to communication*, is often a result of these narrativizations: writers who identify with one narrative will often reject out of hand even seemingly valid arguments made by writers who adhere to a different narrative. Both of these features seem to hover around a key term in the discourse on photography, and that term, “identity,” is arguably at the core of this threshold of invisibility.

“Identity” is a guiding term for considerable discussion on photography, especially in the late twentieth century. Commentators such as Geoffrey Batchen and Stephen Bull point to identity as the key term in a long-standing debate about what photography *is*—a push-pull between modernist and postmodernist ideas. I will discuss this dichotomy at length later in this chapter, but, in general, the difference lies in

essence. The modernist view held that photography—and specifically photographic images—was *essentially* an objective recorder of truth, that the camera faithfully recorded the reality of what was set in front of the lens. Postmodern views denied any independent essence, claiming instead that photography had no identity outside the context of political, cultural, and economic forces. While adherence to either view was likely never universal, the modernist view seems to have been popular during the corresponding historical era, and the postmodernist view seems to have risen to prominence in the later twentieth century, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. But as the diverse community of writers, thinkers and practitioners invested in photography—a community that includes scholars, photographers, journalists, and museum curators, among others—began to consider the possible ramifications of digital imaging and computer media for photography writ large, older views seemed to gain new currency.

As I've suggested, the threshold of invisibility concept provides an opportunity to analyze critical discourse at a particular moment, as the participants in a discussion have had their terministic screens shorn of some of their context, have had them "laid bare" for analysis. This particular threshold of invisibility, the discussions of digital photography, provides an opportunity to glimpse some of the commitments and values embedded in much of the discourse on photography and photographic culture. I would suggest that the rising prominence of digital imaging technology seems to have resuscitated the split between so-called modernist and postmodernist views of photographic identity described above. While the postmodern perspective seems to have been the Jakobsonian dominant

in the discourse on photography by the late 80s and early 90s, the technological shift (at least as it was described) from analogue to digital, from film emulsion to pixels, from darkroom to editing software, seems to have encouraged a renewed attention, or perhaps a (somewhat panicked) discursive reinvestment into the indexicality of photographic images as the primary quality or standard of identity or meaning. In other words, digital imaging seems to have dredged up a latent attachment to the modernist values of objectivity and truth-telling in photography.

But even this formulation downplays the complexity of this particular moment in the discourse on photography. While confused—and, quite literally, mistaken—identity is the focal point for the discursive wrangling at this particular threshold of invisibility, the particular *qualities* of identity are also in question. Much was made at this moment not only about what photography *is* but what it *should be*, or, in terms of stasis, the discourse was concerned both with *definitions* of photography and its *values*. Moral and ethical considerations enter into many of the writings concerned with digital imaging—primarily among writers who lean toward discontinuity; the terms of such views are often celebratory—the “digital revolution”—or mournful—the “death of photography.” For instance, a common thread in writers favoring the “death of photography view” is a loss of authenticity; since digital images are easily manipulated, the admissibility of photographs as legal evidence comes into question. Thus, the entire basis of law in western society is threatened, as is, in some cases, “Truth” itself. But while moral and ethical considerations are perhaps clearest in the work of writers favoring discontinuity,

writers who claim that digital images *do not* disrupt the continuity of photographic culture, history, or practice also demonstrate some commitment to particular values—sometimes while criticizing others for doing the same.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will examine the discourse at the threshold of invisibility surrounding digital photography and computer imaging in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I will examine the arguments of the two clearest perspectives—those arguing that digital images entail a “break” from photographic history and practices and those who argue for continuity—and the structure of their argumentation via Perelman’s dissociation. I will then delve into some of the underlying discourses and paradigms that influence these arguments, paying particular attention to the so-called modernist and postmodern views of photography. Since one part of the disagreement between those views hinges on the role of technology in photographic practice and culture, I will examine how critiques of technology—and perspectives based on photographic process—have influenced thinking both before and during the debates on digital photography. Finally, I will examine how all of these discursive forces seem to have coalesced into a *barrier to communication*, where critics discount the works of other critics due to the paradigms within which they seem to be writing.

### **Participants in and Locations of the Discourse**

The nature of discourse on photography draws in contributors from a number of fields, and discussions on all aspects of photography are carried out in many different forums and in many languages. For the purpose of focus, the conversation covered here



was carried out primarily by Anglo-American scholars, photographers, and other writers. In addition, the range of types of sources represented here also calls for some comment. I've claimed that the threshold of invisibility concept focuses, at least for this dissertation, primarily on scholarly rhetorics and critical discourse. That is certainly the case here, but the conversation on digital photography, as I've mentioned above, draws in many different contributors in different forums. As such, commentators on digital imaging can be found in traditional scholarly articles, book chapters, or monographs, as introductions to collections of photographs in book form (such is the case with Fontcuberta and John Szarkowski), but also in critical introductions and general histories of photography. These last varieties are important since they attempt to tell particular stories, to narrate the history of photography or provide an overview of important ideas in photographic discourse or practice. Not unlike Thomas Kuhn's views of histories of science and science textbooks discussed in Chapter One, these sources are often attempting to reflect a post-paradigm shift (or post-threshold of invisibility) reality, or even to establish one. Such is the case with Martin Lister's entry on digital images in Liz Wells' edited collection *Photography: A Critical Introduction*. In this case, Lister argues forcefully, much like in his other work, *against* the idea of a digital revolution and for a particular version of continuity with a general technological history of photography. All of these texts, I feel, play into this larger conversation, and require some attention in examining this particular moment.

## **Continuity and Discontinuity in Debates on Digital Photography**

In broad terms, the difference between arguments for continuity and for discontinuity seems to hinge on the significance of digital images in the history of media technologies and the fate of photography writ large. Generally, the arguments for discontinuity claim that analogue, chemical, physical photography (the terms vary, but they refer to the same technological process), or the exposing of silver halide crystals on a strip of celluloid to light, was a truly distinct medium from digitally captured or generated images. Many critics would claim, along with William Mitchell in *The Reconfigured Eye*, that digital images differed “as profoundly from a traditional photograph as does a photograph from a painting” (4). The difference between chemical photography and digital photography, then, was a difference not (or not only) between newer and older technology, but between media. This difference was so profound, for some writers at least, that digital photography was as significant as the invention of chemical photography. Fred Ritchin argues both these points, claiming that the shift from “chemically processed grain to discrete electronic pixels” does not create another “photographic genre, but another medium. And this new medium may turn out to be as distinct from its predecessor as photography was from painting, or even as the automobile was from the horse-drawn carriage” (*In Our*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., xii). And Anne-Marie Willis, theorizing about the fate of “naturalistic” imagery in the digital age, likewise suggests that such imagery “is undergoing a mutation as significant as the invention of photography itself” (197-198). Even where the difference was not drawn so strongly,

where, say, types of imagery such as “naturalistic” or “representative” were considered a category, the shift in technology was still treated largely as a profound departure.

And in some cases, digital imagery is such a profound departure from other technologies and media that it becomes *the* departure. Jonathan Crary suggests that the influence of the computer on images makes for a truly historical shift, “a transformation in the nature of visibility probably more profound than the break that separates medieval imagery from Renaissance perspective” (1). Granted, Crary’s primary concern in *Techniques of the Observer* (1990) is the history and construction of vision, but the developments in computer graphics in the 1980s led him to suggest that digital imaging was “part of a sweeping reconfiguration of relations between an observing subject and modes of representation that effectively nullifies most of the culturally established meanings of the terms *observer* and *representation*” (1). In this sense, digital imaging caused—or would cause—a reconfiguration of photographic technology and practice that had implications beyond the broadly constructed category of “photography.” Cultural, even epistemological, notions and realities were also implicated.

While it’s difficult not to see an element of hyperbole in pronouncements that hold up a recent or new technology as the most significant technology in history, some of the cause for such claims might be rooted—or at least mixed up in—related pronouncements on the apparent ramifications for “traditional” photography, or for the fate of chemical photography in a digital world. A prime concern among writers focusing on discontinuity is, following William Mitchell, the loss of adherence to the referent, an

issue most easily glimpsed in the concern over manipulation of images. Digital photographs are mediated by the computer, which provides an impressive set of tools for altering or manipulating images that are at once easier to perform and more accessible to a wider variety of users, as such processes required neither expertise or access to specialized (and expensive) dark room equipment. In a piece with similar sweeping pronouncements, many critics claim that manipulation was not just a feature of the digital image but the defining feature. Willis suggests that the “technology allows, in fact actively encourages, manipulation – with its menus of endlessly seductive possibilities to colour, tilt, flip, cut and paste, reverse and perform any other number of transformations” (206). William Mitchell goes farther by suggesting that digital images are marked by “inherent manipulability,” and thus always presented “a temptation to duplicity” (19). Ritchin, likewise, comments on the “nearly automatic manipulation” of digital imagery and its dangers for various institutions, such as photojournalism (*In Our*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., xii). The general argument holds that, should photographs be so easily manipulated, their value for important public functions such as journalism and for legal evidence will be badly impaired. Manipulation, as an essential quality of digital images, and its many (apparent) ramifications became a key feature and term in shaping the character of arguments for discontinuity (and, later, for arguments for continuity).

Computer manipulation, then, was seen as a fundamental difference (hence a different medium) between chemical and digital photography, one which might lead the latter to utterly replace the former. In this sense, many critics evoked or even echoed Paul

Delaroche's (in)famous claim that, following the introduction of the daguerreotype, "painting is dead!" (qtd. in Batchen 207). In this sense, critics claimed (or feared) that digital photography would replace or even *kill* chemical photography. William Mitchell, and later Ritchin and others, suggested that the new landscape of images was a "post-photographic era" marked the "fragility of our ontological distinctions between the imaginary and the real" (225).<sup>20</sup> But the more striking version of photography's fate directly echoes Delaroche: digital photography is the harbinger of the death of photography. The most vivid example of this idea (perhaps more in keeping with current pop-cultural fascinations with the undead) comes from Willis, who claims that the death of photography is a living death, where "the corpse remains and is re-animated, by a mysterious new process, to inhabit the earth like a zombie" (198). Willis suggests that photographic images will remain, but their production and dissemination will be radically, fundamentally, different—leaving the photographs to shamble about, much like zombies (198-99).

There is considerably more to these arguments for discontinuity, as my analysis below will show, but the explicit claims of those critics writing from this perspective are largely captured here. Digital imagery (or digital photography or, really, any images mediated primarily by the computer) marks a transition of historical proportions between traditional, chemical, or mechanical photography and the new, primarily digital imaging landscape. This landscape features a profoundly new medium, characterized by ease of

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<sup>20</sup> The subtitle of *The Reconfigured Eye*, appropriately, is *Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*.

manipulation by means of a computer interface, an approach that will replace or eliminate older process of photographic production. Attendant to this shift and new reality are a number of other issues, including some differing views on the value of this shift; some critics seemed to celebrate the change and others mourned it, giving rise to competing narratives within this larger narrativization of photographic history. This divide might be summed up in the terms “post-photography”—which took on, at times, a celebratory tone regarding the so-called digital revolution—and the “death of photography”—which, perhaps unsurprisingly, mourned the loss of qualities associated with chemical photography. But this internal division is largely dismissed or even unnoticed by the other primary narrativization I’m concerned with here, that is, arguments toward the continuity of photographic imagery.

In general, perspectives on digital photography that emphasize continuity tend to draw on considerations of larger contexts, or position the technological changes within a larger system of such instances in the history of photography. But, notably, many of these critics also frame their positions as critiques, or reactions to, the seemingly wide-spread pronouncements (and perhaps the appeal of such claims) of the death of photography or of the post-photographic era. In fact, many arguments for continuity—ones that rejected post-photography or the death of photography—begin with what might be characterized as a call for calm, reason, or focus. Martin Lister suggests that developments in digital imaging have been accompanied by “a tidal wave of journalistic and critical attention” and “wide and wild speculation” from “a bewildering range of voices” (“Introductory” 1-

2). But focused thought, Lister claims, is hard to come by in all of this, so his edited collection, *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, attempts to provide that focus (“Introductory” 2). Likewise, Kevin Robins critiques the terms of the discussion—the “technoeuphoria” of the digital revolution—as primarily exhibiting excitement (or, presumably, fear) rather than critical engagement (30). The sense here is that arguments about the potential changes wrought by digital images seem more given to excitement, to panic even, than to careful analysis. Writers favoring the view of continuity tend to criticize the discourse of discontinuity as overly selective or narrow and counter by suggesting critical engagement with a broader context.

The standard critique of post-photography might be characterized as a call for consideration of a larger context—a larger Burkean circumference. Lister—the critic who seems to argue most forcefully for continuity—claims that two “registers” are apparent in the conversation on digital photography: the “local,” the practice and work done by photographers and the implications for their profession; and the “global or epochal,” the discussions of “historic shifts in science, technology, and visual culture” (“Introductory” 3). Lister suggests that these two registers have become entangled, where the “particular, more vocational and defensive debate concerning the displacement of photographic practice by the use of digital technology, has been subsumed within the more generalizing and specular discourse about epochal change” (“Introductory” 4). The resultant discourse, for Lister, is the discourse of post-photography, one that “stresses and celebrates rupture and discontinuity in visual culture and trades in stark oppositions

between the old and the new” (“Introductory” 5). This discourse largely ignores, or its participants are unaware of, the many approaches to visual culture across many disciplines, though Lister speculates that this may be a particular choice, as established discourses might “lack the thrill and erotic charge of a vision which does see technology as an autonomous, powerful and uncontrollable force” (“Introductory” 6). This, of course, leads to a key concept in the difference between arguments for discontinuity and continuity: the former, at least according to the latter, often flirts with technological determinism, or sees new technologies as autonomous forces, capable of causing change in their own right. The argument for continuity, on the other hand, sees technology, and photography in particular, as embedded in a whole host of cultural, social, economic, and political forces.

This is most noticeable in Lister’s introductory essay, where he calls for attention to be paid to the “traditions of critical and theoretical work” in a number of disciplines that, despite their widespread foci and even disagreements, have rarely supported “any direct causal relation between technological and cultural change” but “demonstrate instead...the historical and social shaping of media technologies and the ways in which they are themselves conceived, defined, imagined and used within the cultures of everyday life” (“Introductory” 5). For Lister, culture helps to shape technology, and this perspective rejects the post-photography idea, which assumes that digital technology is the agent or catalyst of change. But equally important, for Lister and others, is what photography, and specifically photographs, actually do within their contexts. Photographs



are, for Lister, heavily intertextual, due in no small part to their “sheer pervasiveness...in all major areas of social and cultural life,” a quality that ensures that images draw meaning and significance from this context—and from other images—such that “meanings of any particular photographic image are not freestanding and autonomous, as if fenced off from all others” (“Introductory” 13). The viability of a photographic image as evidence, a serious concern of the post-photography perspective, is also accounted for by a particular context. Robins points out that photographic evidence has never been free standing, but rather reliant on a system of values wherein “visual experience and evidence could only perform its task, for certain purposes at least, if it were incorporated within systems of rational procedure analysis” (37).<sup>21</sup> Legal and scientific procedures are not themselves threatened by digital images, since they’ve allowed for images to be used as evidence of various phenomena in the first place. The guiding principle here might be that cultural context, not technology, shapes the meanings and uses, if not the very role, of photography in society.

But while these claims for continuity—taken out to the larger context or circumference of culture—certainly account for many of the questions (and fears) raised by post-photography, it’s difficult to overlook the very real, substantive, mechanical difference between chemical and digital photography. This, however, is also a question of scope for those arguing for continuity. Lister points out that the beginning and end states of the photographic process, “images that have their source in the camera lens pointed at

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<sup>21</sup> A point drawn from the work of thinkers like Allan Sekula and John Tagg, who I’ll discuss below.

the world and a destination in the ink on a printed page,” are largely unchanged; the difference, rather, is in

the processes that intervene between these two points...[which have become] digital, electronic and interactive, and frequently involve telecommunication systems for exchanging work in progress and as a means of distributing and exhibiting images (“Photography” 305-306)

The differences for Lister are relatively minor (though they will require discussion), but, as Martha Rosler suggests, the differences are more likely to result in more tangible or labor-related shifts, such as the “loss of relative autonomy for the professional photographer” (a shift already in process), than any large-scale altering of societal conceptions of truth (284). This fits more neatly into the context set forth by writers arguing for (general) continuity, and speaks to a larger arc or narrative that subsumes digital photography into a series of technical advancements within the larger scope of the history of photography.

Those arguing for continuity do not see digital photography as a radical departure from most photographic practice or from the history of photography more generally. Lister suggests that no matter how “dramatic they are, these technological transformations are only the latest in a number of such transformations that are part of photography's history, and alongside them the practice of traditional chemical photography continues” (“Photography” 306). As such, there’s no ending or death of photography, but rather a new, concurrent part of a larger whole. Manipulation of images, one of the key concerns of post-photography, is likewise a concern situated within an established context. Geoffrey Batchen suggests that manipulation has always been a part

of photography, and that the history of photography is so littered with manipulated images that “it could be argued that photography is nothing but that history [of manipulation]” (212). This refers not only to “notorious” manipulated images—such as the Herzl-Kaiser image examined by W.J.T. Mitchell—but to the actual production of photographs. “After all,” Batchen asks, “what else is photography, other than the manipulation of light levels, exposure times, chemical concentrations, tonal ranges, and so on?” (212). For these thinkers, the digital image or its process are no different—and here, W.J.T. Mitchell’s rebuke of William Mitchell becomes particularly relevant: what was done in the darkroom is now done on a computer desktop (“WJT Mitchell Lecture”)—or are not, perhaps, substantively different than the images and processes of chemical photography. Lister, in fact, argues that “while there are differences to attend to, *there is no clean break*, except in the trivial 'mouse clicking' sense and the assertive myths of marketing hype, between the older analog photographic media and digital” (“Introductory” 20, emphasis his). Batchen, too, points to some changes and differences, but, continuing the argument against technological determinism, suggests that “[i]t should be clear to those familiar with the history of photography that a change in imaging technology will not, in and of itself, cause the disappearance of the photograph and the culture it sustains” (213). Ultimately, “photography” or, more directly, “photographic culture,” might be useful terms and phrases to identify the dominant, overarching concept that allows for an argument aimed at continuity. For thinkers in this vein, digital imaging is a new technology within a larger conversation—on photographic culture—rather than a

new medium that is to photography as photography was to painting. In this view, there is no “post-photography” or “death of photography,” as photographic practice and culture continues, albeit with new technical tools.

### **Dissociative Pairs in Arguments for Discontinuity and Continuity**

Much of the argumentation from both perspectives—continuity and discontinuity—seeks to separate out particular qualities and select or affirm guiding principles. As such, Perelman’s dissociation is a particularly useful analytical tool for this discourse. The term at the core of argumentation for both perspectives is, as I’ve suggested, the *identity* of photography, or, simply put, what photography *is*. On the side of discontinuity, the prime focus is on the implications of photographic technology, and especially how changes in that technology, especially developments in digital or computer mediated photography, define or redefine the identity of photography. Arguments for continuity, on the other hand, claim a larger focus, wherein photographic technology is part of a set of factors—along with social, political, economic, and cultural factors—that define the identity of photography.

A majority of the concerns of post-photography, the arguments for discontinuity, seem to stem from the specific technical difference between chemical and digital photography. From these particular differences, a number of larger, philosophical problems arise—for instance, the technical manipulation of digital images calls into question the veracity of visual or photographic evidence in legal settings, and thus challenges what is “real” or “truthful” more generally. The identity of photography, what

it *is*, has its origins in the technology of the medium. In keeping with William Mitchell's view of chemical photographs adhering to the referent—that gold standard of visual truth—chemical photography is invested with a number of values clustered around ideas of *truth* and *reality*, along with attendant ethical concerns in the realms of legal proceedings, governance, and journalism. Digital photography, on the other hand, becomes invested with a variety of problematic values, including its inherent manipulability and the constant temptation for deception.

In many ways, then, the arguments on the main term, photography, might be demonstrated as a dissociative pair separating out digital and chemical photography,<sup>22</sup> where chemical photography is the privileged term, or term II:

digital photography

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chemical photography

Two particular dissociative relationships that Perelman discusses are relevant here. First, there is the sense that a term II stands for the authentic, the natural, and “[t]erm I will often be disqualified as being factitious or artificial, as being *opposed* to that which is authentic and natural” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 440, emphasis added). In this case, chemical photography, as natural, real, and generally un-manipulated, a gold standard of truth via adherence to the referent, carries this kind of authenticity, whereas

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<sup>22</sup> As I mentioned above, “traditional” (i.e., non-digital) photography is given a number of names in this discourse, all of which seek to differentiate it from “digital” photography. Chemical, physical, traditional, and analogue are all deployed as adjectives to photography, and they all seem to refer to the same general technological process, that of exposing a strip of physical, celluloid film to light.

digital photography, as inherently manipulable and ever tempting to manipulate, fits the idea of the artificial rather neatly. Indeed, some writers go so far as to claim that digital photographs require no reference to (or referent in) the real whatsoever, as such images can be generated entirely by a computer. As the general issue of manipulation and how it is framed in this argument might indicate, there is also a strong ethical component to most of the argumentation for discontinuity. While values like authenticity speak to this already, I will discuss some more of the deep-seated ethical concerns of this perspective below.

The second dissociative relationship of value here expands on this idea of the real. Since the values of this particular term II, chemical photography, are very rooted in accuracy or reality (and, as above, the natural or authentic), this pair is nearly synonymous with Perelman's prototypical pairing, appearance and reality (where reality is the privileged term II). Part of this prototype speaks to the action of dissociation, the effect of one term's application to another. Term II, in this case reality or chemical photography, is "normative and explanatory," which allows, after dissociation, for term II to "retain or to disqualify the various aspects under which term I is presented" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 416). Thus, using chemical photography as a term II allows it to correct the term one of digital photography, or "to dissociate those appearances that are deceptive from those that correspond to reality" (416).

It's important to note here, though, that I have identified "digital photography" as the term I specifically because this dissociative pair seeks to, in Perelman's terms,

remodel our “conception of reality” in order to eliminate the incompatibilities that lead to dissociation in the first place (413). This particular dissociative pairing allows for the new condition (or reality) of “post-photography” because it specifically eliminates or rejects the elements of digital photography rooted in the “artificial” manipulations of the computer. In short, there is no digital *photography* proper, as that term has been “purified” via the values and criteria of authenticity in term II, chemical photography. This dissociative pairing, then, produces a *new* conception of photography that is separate from the practices and processes of computer-generated images. Thus, the digital paradigm is *not* photography, but a new medium altogether, as per the claims of William Mitchell, Ritchin, and others. This so-called new photography (which, from some perspectives, isn’t particularly new at all) is an important component of both this perspective toward discontinuity—of drawing a line between photography and a new, computer mediated medium—and the perspective on continuity, which incorporates technological differences into a larger set of values.

Arguments for continuity, as we’ve seen, tend to privilege a larger, cultural context over more specific, technical or technological changes. They tend to incorporate technology, practice, discourse, and various other components into a larger category of “photographic culture,” which, taken as a whole, helps define the identity of photography (what photography *is*). As such, this perspective looks to subsume the particular issues of technological change and practice—which are the pivotal points of contention in post-photography—into a broader context. As I will discuss below, this tendency seems to

spring from a prominent line of theorization in the discourse on photography—often referred to as a “postmodern view”—that rejects the essentializing of perspectives that privilege indexicality and adherence to the referent as the main features of the identity of photography (the so-called “modernist” view). As such, the new “conception of reality” argued for here is one that seeks to encompass the technological aspects of photography rather than to separate them out. The new state, then, is more expansive, and might be expressed as a dissociative pair as follows:

photographic technology

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photographic culture

This pairing, which privileges culture, “establishes hierarchies for which it endeavors to provide criteria” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 420). Here, photographic culture is the overarching concept that is normative relative to photographic technology. Photographic culture, as term II, “indicates what serves as a criterion of value, whereas term I indicates that which does not satisfy this criterion” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 441).

Photographic culture provides a guiding principle, a holistic description, that photographic technology cannot provide on its own. Photographic technology—and the associated issues of indexicality, manipulation, and so on—make up only part of the dynamics of photography, which also includes photographic practice, cultural and societal norms and expectations, and specific discourses (legal and journalistic) that in some way value or use photographic images in particular ways.



These dissociative pairs both illustrate the structure of argumentation in these perspectives and suggest a path to a more extensive look at the embedded values in each, or, rather, for an extensive exploration of the makeup of their terministic screens. Since *identity* is a core term in this discussion and in discourse on photography more generally, perspectives on that particular quality of photography, or attempts to define the medium, provide a considerable amount of material for the discussion on digital photography. As I've suggested above, two conflicting perspectives, often labeled the modern and postmodern views of photography's identity, help to inform the conflicting views over digital photography. But, as I will argue below, these two viewpoints on identity *inform* the discourse on digital photography but do not define it; it's not sufficient to align the modern perspective with post-photography or the postmodern view with photographic culture. Indeed, the ways in which values embedded in the modern and postmodern views surface in the discussion of digital photography complicates both those views *and* the clear-cut division between perspectives—continuity and discontinuity—on digital photography.

### **Roots of the Arguments: Modern and Postmodern Views of Identity**

Discussions on photography's identity—what photography *is*—have largely been categorized into a push-pull between the two general perspectives of modernism and postmodernism. Geoffrey Batchen describes the difference as one between postmodern views favoring context and formalist critics valuing the “fundamental characteristics” of the medium, or “a struggle between those who identify [photography] with culture and

those who located its inherent nature” (ix). Stephen Bull, likewise, suggests that these two camps loosely correlate to views on how ideas about nature and culture inform or shape views on what photography is (5). Bull, borrowing from Raymond Williams, “broadly” summarizes “‘nature’ as something that is unchanging and timeless; and ‘culture’ as something that derives from human society and is subject to change” (9). Broadly speaking, these two qualities approximate the corresponding views: modern as a concern with nature, postmodern as a concern with culture.

Batchen describes the modernist perspective as a primarily formalist view, one that borrows from Clement Greenberg’s “continual search for each art form’s fundamental, irreducible essence” (13).<sup>23</sup> In the case of photography, this kind of essentialism is connected to what a photographic image can capture of the world and is exemplified, for Batchen, in the work of French film critic Andre Bazin (writing in 1945) and photographer and curator John Szarkowski (1966). For Bazin, photography possesses an “essentially objective character” and is a process of capturing images of the world “without the creative intervention of man” (13). Eliminating the subjective touch of the artist’s hand—Bazin situates photography in the context of the plastic arts more generally—speaks, in this case, to an “obsession with realism” or an “appetite for illusion” that had long constrained representative art (12). Photography automatically (mechanically) captures reality where the plastic arts can only approximate; photographs,

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<sup>23</sup> This section is guided primarily by the overviews provided by Batchen and Bull, but I have also looked more closely at the particular works of authors that Batchen covers. Where he primarily addresses the general tendencies of each thinker, I’ve examined the more specific arguments of Bazin, Szarkowski, Tagg, and Sekula directly.

for Bazin, show the true thing, the true object or model itself (14). Szarkowski, similarly, values that sense of reality, claiming that photography deals with “the actual,” that the process of photographing—and the thinking and work of the photographer—reacts to what already exists (8). For Szarkowski, “the world itself is an artist of incomparable inventiveness,” and the photographer’s job is to capture it, though this still “requires intelligence both acute and supple” (8). As the “acute and supple” intelligence, the qualities of the photographer might indicate, Szarkowski seems to privilege, primarily, art photography. Batchen observes that this not an uncommon move, and that many histories of photography are actually art histories (15).

Regardless, both Bazin and Szarkowski see photography as a departure from previous arts in terms of its relation to the world, to an external reality. This departure is invested with both a historical and a technological aspect, where photography is a break from other arts (an argument for discontinuity) due to its technical ability to capture an image of reality, or its indexicality. For Bazin, the change is both radical and liberatory, as photography, in meeting that desire for realistic depiction, also “freed the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness” (12). Szarkowski labels photography a “radically new picture-making process – a process based not on synthesis but on selection” (6). Paintings, says Szarkowski, were “*made*—constructed from a storehouse of traditional schemes and skills and attitudes” whereas photographs reflected what was already there, selecting it and capturing it, and, thus, were “*taken*” (6, emphasis in original). This focus on what’s there to be taken, the real, or what Szarkowski calls “the thing itself” (8), is

often equated to a privileging of the indexicality of the photograph. The term is borrowed from C.S. Peirce, and refers to a sign “that is seen to have a direct physical relationship to its object” (Bull 15). This particular quality is a key component of what might loosely be called the modernist or formalist perspective, especially when considering later conversations on digital photography.

The postmodern perspective, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with defining photography by means of the context in which it appears. Bull differentiates the postmodern perspective from the modernist one by pointing out its fragmentation—not unified around a core concept of nature—and its focus more on “social issues rather than aesthetic ones” (12). For Batchen, the postmodern view is composed of a rich and varied body of voices—including critical influences like Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and so on—that has a fairly consistent view (5). Drawing from the work of John Tagg, Batchen summarizes the general project of postmodernism (in this context) as the denial that photography has a “static identity or singular cultural status” but, rather, should be “regarded as a dispersed and dynamic field of technologies, practices, and images” (Batchen 5). For Tagg, photography is located in a set of discursive systems that shape its identity and meanings. For instance, when a photograph is considered as legal evidence, these systems are highly evident, to the extent that a photograph’s ability “to stand as *evidence*...rests not on a natural or existential fact, but on a social, semiotic process” wherein we accept images as part of a system of legal argumentation (4). Tagg’s

main focus is on the “present meanings” and “changing discursive systems,” as these are the qualities, rather than some innate essence, that give photographs their meaning (4).

Likewise, Allan Sekula argues that photographs derive meaning and value from context, but he also cautions that removing a photograph from that context might be problematic. For Sekula, “photographs, in themselves, are fragmentary and incomplete utterances. Meaning is always directed by layout, captions, text, and site and mode of presentation” (155). Examining—and critiquing—collections of photographs in archival books, Sekula suggests that taking a photograph out of its context, as in a printed collection or archive, creates a situation where “specificity of ‘original’ uses and meanings can be avoided, and even made invisible” (154). This, says Sekula, can obscure the differences, the “antagonism,” between “looks,” or between forces like labor and capital (154-155). Both Tagg and Sekula challenge the autonomous indexical quality of photographs prized by formalists. Tagg goes so far as to suggest that the indexical quality of a photograph, “the causative link between the pre-photographic reference and a sign,” is actually made by “a discriminatory technical, cultural and historical process in which particular optical and chemical devices are set to work to organize experience and desire and produce a new reality” (3). This relationship is, obviously, far more complicated than the one-to-one relationship between the image and “the thing itself.” For his part, Sekula actually locates the idea of indexicality within the context of a number of cultural forces that

drag us in two contradictory directions; toward ‘science’ and a myth of ‘objective truth’ on the one hand, and toward ‘art’ and a cult of ‘subjective experience’ on

the other. This dualism haunts photography, lending a certain goofy inconsistency to most commonplace assertions about the medium. (160)

This inconsistency, to me, speaks to a particular quality of both the discourse on photography as captured in these perspectives and in discussions on digital photography. What's valuable here, though, is the characterization of photography as seen in both Tagg and Sekula, that the photograph (and "photography" more broadly) only functions within a context, that it is, on its own, fragmentary or incomplete, and relies on discursive or cultural forces in order to be meaningful or valuable, or even used, in certain ways. The relationships between forces here form the essence of the postmodern position on photography.

Batchen, as part of a project aimed at examining (and critiquing) the formalist and postmodern perspectives, is concerned with broader discussions beyond my brief characterizations of these perspectives here. As his commentary on art histories suggests, he emphasizes Szarkowski's focus on art photography—the privileging of "the most self-conscious photographs, those that appear to be in some way about their own process of production"—as a main contributor to the formalist "project" (15). Obviously, this particular obsession provides a particularly narrow focus. The postmodern perspective suffers from similar exaggerations or reductions, though it differs in scope. For postmodern critics, "photographic meaning is entirely mutable and contingent," which leads to the logical conclusion "that the medium can have no autonomous history or fixed identity. They argue that there can be *no such thing* as a singular photography at all, only discontinuous, myriad *photographies*" (12, emphasis in original). While a formalist view

presents far too specific a picture of the identity of photography, the postmodern view seems to deny any specific identity at all. As such, there is an extremist feel to both perspectives, as least as they are characterized and, at times, employed as guiding principles for thinking on photography. Indeed, Batchen concludes that the respective positions may not even address the question of identity in the expected manner:

In a sense, the entire laborious argument between them reduces down to a single, deceptively simple question: is photography to be identified with (its own) nature or with the culture that surrounds it? Their argument is about the *location* of photography's identity, about its boundaries and limits, rather than about identity per se. (17)

Even though only the formalist perspective claims to identify the essence of photography, both perspectives end up doing so; both perspectives identify a *location* of photography's identity—in the thing itself (nature) or in its cultural context—and both, subsequently, provide it with essential qualities (Batchen 20-21). This almost avoids the core question of identity entirely, a situation where, Batchen claims, both perspectives “avoid coming to grips with the historical and ontological complexity of the very thing they claim to analyze” (21).

### **Modernism and Postmodernism in a Barrier to Communication**

It is in this context, where both perspectives are clearly not infallible, that we can return to the question of digital photography. It would be simple to merely draw connections between a formalist view and post-photography, and between a postmodern view and arguments for photographic culture. The correlations—and the influence—are clearly present. But so, too, are the inconsistencies and issues that Batchen highlights, and the ways in which the issues within these perspectives are brought forward into the

discussion on digital photography have a fair amount of influence on that discussion.

Ultimately, discussions on digital photography are heavily influenced by the antagonism between modernist and postmodern views, which leads to a difficulty in communicating about digital photography in general.

The contentiousness of discussions on digital photography stem in part from the relative position of the modernist and postmodern views in discourse on photography at the time. By the mid-1990s, the two perspectives were not co-equal views. Indeed, the postmodern view seems to have been, in general, in the ascendency, at least from the 1970s and 1980s. Derrick Price and Liz Wells even go so far as to claim that modernist formalism, and its emphasis on capturing the real, is largely a thing of the past, that “[a]nalogical theories of photographs have been abandoned; we no longer believe that the photograph directly replicates circumstances,” though photographs retain “an indexical effect caused by a particular conjuncture of circumstances (including subject-matter, framing, light, characteristics of the lens, chemical properties and darkroom decisions). This basis in the observable lends a sense of authenticity to the photograph” (Price and Wells 18). While analogical theories are no longer relevant, the indexical effect remains; but Price and Wells observe that this particular effect, indexicality, is a result of technological circumstances, and is but one part of the discussion that includes “philosophical, technical, and aesthetic issues...[which] all feature within ontological debates relating to the photograph” (Price and Wells 18). Lister, too, argues for indexicality’s reduced role in thinking on photography, and posits that dominant trends in



the discussion hold that “[i]t *has long been clear* that [indexicality] has only a small part to play in the meanings that a photograph has” (“Photography” 332, emphasis added). For Lister, those “ambiguously complex meanings” are now “understood to be the result of complex technological, cultural, ideological and psychological processes in which indexicality is but one element” (“Photography” 332). Here, of course, is the postmodern view, that each of these parts contribute to a larger context, a network of forces that create a loosely defined photographic culture. Crucially, this view reduces the technologically focused modernist view to a part of a larger whole, thus offering a new, more comprehensive view than the “abandoned” analogical theories. Batchen argues that the postmodern view is, within a “certain intellectual milieu” of contemporary scholarly theory, “the dominant way of thinking about the medium. It is now ubiquitous in undergraduate and graduate classes in photographic history and criticism and is frequently reproduced in articles and books on the medium” (5). In short, the postmodern view is an established paradigm in most discourse on photography.

The apparent resurgence of formalist views in the discussion of digital photography, then, signals an immediate potential *barrier to communication* between participants, as the dominant postmodern view essentially constitutes an orientation that no longer accepts the validity of technologically centered, realist views privileging indexicality as the main feature of the photographic medium. Lister’s apparent frustration that the “indexical quality” of photography is being “stressed above all others in the polarized debates” on digital photography likely stems from this reliance on outmoded

theories (“Photography” 332). In fact, Lister identifies arguments about digital photography as mere resuscitations of older—and largely settled—debates. The opposition between photography and digital photography is, for Lister, a continuation of a “debate between those who have stressed the photographic image's privileged status as a trustworthy mechanical analog of reality and those who have stressed its constructed, artifactual, and ideological character” (“Introductory” 9). The debate is the same, but the “sites” have shifted; this

vexed and often tedious argument about something called the *photographic medium* is now being cast as a debate *between* photography and the digital image...[where in] One view, the realist, stays attached (in a less subtle but newly zealous form) to photography; the other, what could be called the constructivist position, has been transferred to the digital. (“Introductory” 9-10)

This particular instantiation functions similarly to past iterations as a means to set off photography from other media or practices. Lister draws a parallel between the “early twentieth-century forms” of the debate that claimed “something essential and unique about photography as it claimed its own place within high modernist culture. Now it is being used to distinguish a suddenly sad and earthbound photography from the creative realms of the new digital technologies” (“Introductory” 10). I will return to this characterization of photography as “sad and earthbound” and the “creative realms” of digital photography below, but this particular passage is notable for its remanding of the indexical quality of photography to a constituent, rather than a dominant, role in photographic meaning. This characterization fits with the general mode of the postmodern view, where a complex of forces contribute to photographic culture and

individual instances of those forces—the “latest” technological development—combine to inform the larger view.

But the return, the rehashing, of older arguments seems to pose a problem. For Lister, these latest arguments on digital photography “short circuit much of what has been understood about photographic representation” and “divert attention” from the important complex of ideas that make up the so-called postmodern view (“Photography” 332). In a way, post-photography is seen as oversimplifying the issue, and the complexity of photographic culture seems to be drowned out by the techno-euphoria and attendant dichotomies addressed by both Lister and Robins. For Robins, post-photographic discourse is largely “simple and unthinking progressivism, unswerving in its belief that the future is always superior to the past, and firm in its conviction that this superior future is a spontaneous consequence of technological development” (30). The sensationalism of the claims Robins critiques seem to have taken the place of more reasoned and careful analysis, an issue Lister recounts as well. But for both critics, the resurgence of well-worn arguments on photography signal a step back; Robins finds the discourse on “digital culture” to be “distinctly unimaginative and dismally repetitive” (32), whereas Lister suggests that the return of the older formalist debates signals a “crude” return to a “monolithic” view of photography where “its technological basis again becomes its defining feature” (Lister, “Introductory,” 11). In brief, post-photography, as a perspective, is unduly burdened by outdated, or perhaps outmoded, views and is built

mostly from an “abandoned” set of theories or a rejected paradigm that obscures useful, productive discussion on photography in the name of sensationalism.

But there are two issues with this characterization, and both play a key role in the communicative difficulty at this particular threshold of invisibility. First, however “crude” the arguments privileging indexicality and, more importantly, the technology of photography, it is still, even within the framework of the postmodern view, an influential, even formative factor in many discussions of photography. Second, the focus of critics like Lister and Robins is largely on the sensationalist end of post-photographic discourse; somewhat overlooked is the other, less enthusiastic perspective within that discourse concerned with the apparent “death” of photography. As I will explore more below, the characterization of post-photography as “simple” and “euphoric” may itself be overly simplistic, and it’s possible some of the critics of post-photography have misread the arguments of its primary proponents, most notably William Mitchell.

### **Technology as a Persistent Talking Point**

The persistence of formalist views should, perhaps, not be such a surprise, given how firmly the discourse on photography seems to be entangled with discourse on its technology. Indeed, much of the debate on the *identity* of photography stems from the celebration or rejection of photographic technology as a key component of what photography *is*. But this entanglement itself is curious, perhaps even reminiscent of Sekula’s characterization of photography’s “goofy inconsistency” (160). Discourses on photography that privilege technology seem primarily concerned with photography *as a*

technology, and with the broader implications of that technology, than with the actual specifications *of* that technology. These relationships are explored most directly by Joel Snyder, who looks to interrogate the technological basis of modernist views of photography. Snyder and Neil Allen find it “odd that modern critics who believe that the photographic process should be the starting point for criticism have had very little to say about what the process is, how it works, and what it does and doesn't guarantee” (148). They go on to identify a couple of models of how photography works, one grounded in the similarity between the photographic image and human vision and the other privileging a mechanical connection between the photographic subject and its image (here again is adherence to the referent) (Snyder and Allen 149). Both the work of Snyder and Allen and, later, Snyder's own work, look to demonstrate the lack of grounding for such models in technological reality. Simply put, we do not see in still images, with one lens of the same specification as a camera, or with the resultant image printed in a rectangular shape on photographic paper; they list other differences here, along with technical specifications of the camera, lenses, and photographic paper, but this general list should probably suffice (Snyder and Allen 152, Snyder 505).<sup>24</sup> As for the mechanical

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<sup>24</sup> The weight of Snyder and Allen's technological critique here is extensive: “No doubt [the visual model] originated in, and retains its plausibility because of, the supposed resemblance of the human eye with its lens and retina to the camera with its lens and film. But once this resemblance has been stated, the model fails to establish anything further. The notion that a photograph shows us ‘what we would have seen had we been there ourselves’ has to be qualified to the point of absurdity. A photograph shows us ‘what we would have seen’ at a certain moment in time, *from* a certain vantage point *if* we kept our head immobile *and* closed one eye *and if* we saw with the equivalent of a 150-mm or 24-mm lens *and if* we saw things in Agfacolor or in Tri-X developed in D-76 and printed on Kodabromide #3 paper. By the time all the conditions are added up, the original position has been reversed: instead of saying that the camera shows us what our eyes would see, we are now positing the rather unilluminating proposition that, if our vision

model, Snyder and Allen point out that all images are, mechanically the same—as “mechanical deposits of light”—but “acceptable” pictures are always made according to a set of conventions that depend on context; they use the complex process of recording a “photofinish” in horse racing and the use of different levels of exposure to light (one image overexposed, one underexposed) to demonstrate the stark differences between what is captured on film and the “reality” in front of the lens (158-59, 162). All of this is to say that the relationship between the photograph and reality, that privileged by modernist views, is not borne out by the *mechanical* or *technical* reality of the photographic process.

But Snyder, despite his arguable connection to a postmodern view of photography, also observes that the connection between image and reality remains, even in the face of evidence, strangely persuasive. For Snyder,

the conclusive refutations of copy or illusion theories somehow fail to be convincing; we are left with a strong feeling, after all the refutations are advanced, that there must, nonetheless, be a natural or privileged or unreasoned relation between realistic picture and world. (502)

In this case, Snyder is discussing the whole set of realistic imagery, of which photography is only a part, but the technological aspects of image making are, once again, not sufficient to explain the supposed connection between the image and its referent. He goes so far as to argue, in fact, that the “grab bag category of realistic pictures will forever defy general analysis” (526). There remains something persuasive

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worked like photography, then we would see things the way a camera does” (151-152, emphasis in original).

about these technologically based theories of images, something that defies even a careful refutation of their accuracy.

This may be an issue, then, of function. The models that Snyder and Allen describe can be refuted, but, strangely, their persuasiveness might remain more or less intact. This is likely due, in part, to the function of such models (as arguments), which were perhaps

not intended as serious descriptions of the photographic process in the first place and are only put forward as ‘negative’ definitions in order to establish what is peculiarly photographic about photography by way of contrast with what is peculiarly “artistic” about art. (163)

This fits with Bazin, Szarkowski, and others who explicitly argue for photography’s unique qualities among the various representative arts. Photography, for these critics, is different because the machinery involved—the camera, film stock, and chemical processes—sets the images it creates apart from those created by the “subjective” hand of human artists. Bazin claims that the intervention of the hand of the artist “cast a shadow of doubt over the image,” as no painter could—with the pure objectivity offered only by the camera—accurately represent reality (13). Rudolph Arnheim, likewise, sees the photographic image as one that more accurately captures reality rather than the choices of an artist; what’s in a photograph is not placed there “as a compositional touch,” which allows photographs to provide a “vacation from artifice” (157). For Szarkowski, of course, the photography deals with the actual—the thing itself—and not what an artist had drawn. But, crucially, Szarkowski also suggests that the difference is one of scale of detail: a “trained artist could draw a head or a hand from a dozen perspectives. The

photographer discovered that the gestures of a hand were infinitely various, and that the wall of a building in the sun was never twice the same” (7). A photograph, then, could capture infinite detail, where the artist was limited to a handful of possibilities. This particular difference is also an important part of how these technological arguments carried forward to debates on digital photography.

The value, or the use, of these models and arguments, regardless of their technical accuracy, seems to lie in their taxonomic quality or their use in setting photography apart. The entanglement of discourse on photography with the discourse on its technology is one more instance of an issue with *identity*, where the arguments about what photography *is* are wrapped up in its technical process, but only to the extent that that process differs from other processes that produce other media. As I’ve argued above, the core of the post-photography argument resides in the technical differences between chemical and digital photography—the dissociation of the digital photography/chemical photography pair. There, also, the technical distinction drawn between chemical and digital photography serves to distinguish between media; the technical differences, to paraphrase several critics, are enough to make digital photography as different from photography as photography is (or was) from painting. It’s fair to conclude that the arguments about technical differences are likely as focused on differentiating digital photography from chemical photography as similar arguments were on differentiating photography from painting.



And these arguments are, in fact, evoked as part of the discussion of post-photography. William Mitchell, notably, reviews arguments from Bazin, John Berger, Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and others that point to (chemical) photography's indexicality (adherence to the referent) and its automaticity (lack of human "hand"). Drawing from John Berger's "brilliantly epigrammatic essay" "Understanding a Photograph," Mitchell<sup>25</sup> claims that the "influential Marxist critic" "insists that the interest of a photography depends *totally* on [its] tenacious adherence of the referent" (26, emphasis in original). Berger, for his part, aims to differentiate photography from fine art by claiming that "photographs are records of things seen...no closer to works of art than cardiograms" (qtd. in Mitchell 26; Berger 291-292). Berger's full argument concerns property value, which photographs lack because "they have no rarity value" and are "infinitely reproducible," and that photographs "bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation," the "decision that it is worth recording that this particular object has been seen" (291-92). Mitchell, however, primarily emphasizes adherence to the referent, Berger's record of something seen, and draws on a common metaphor used by a number of thinkers, including Sontag and Bazin: the photograph as death mask. Sontag characterizes photographs not only as an "image...an interpretation of the real," but as "a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask" (qtd. in Mitchell 24; Sontag 154). Bazin, probably originating the metaphor (at least in Mitchell's view), "compares photographs to mummies and relics...and mischievously

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<sup>25</sup> In this passage, "Mitchell" refers to William J. Mitchell and, primarily, his text *The Reconfigured Eye*.

describes the Holy Shroud of Turin as a combination of relic and photograph” (Mitchell 25-26). It’s worth noting here that Bazin suggests that a “mummy complex” informs all the plastic arts: “If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation” (9). Thus, part of photography’s value lies in perfecting this process and freeing the other arts, and especially painting, from a “resemblance complex” (Bazin 13).

And Mitchell, in a way, takes up part of Bazin’s general project of differentiating photography and painting by pointing to the technical qualities of photography. Capping a lengthy discussion that I’ve only partly covered here, Mitchell emphasizes the commonly held view that the camera is the “ideal Cartesian instrument,” a “supereye—a perceptual prosthesis that can stop action better than the human eye, resolve finer detail, remorselessly attend to the subtlest distinctions or intensity, and not leave unregistered anything in the field of gaze” (28). This, of course, is the modernist valuation of indexicality, and Mitchell takes pains to explore and establish this particular thinking through much of the early chapters of *The Reconfigured Eye*. Drawing from Bazin’s arguments about the removal of the artist’s hand in photography, Mitchell draws a connection between “the exclusion of human bias” and “many standard scientific procedures,” which require the kind of objectivity of the (formalist) photographic image that, in fact, “motivates the ‘plain,’ ostensibly unrheterical style of formal scientific discourse” (28). The connection drawn here, between photography and empirical science,

evokes another long-standing (mainly modernist) view of the photograph: that it is a piece with positivism and Cartesian principles of truth.

Both the emphasis on indexicality and automaticity speak to the particular rhetorical function of technological models of photography discussed (and refuted) by Snyder and Allen. Mitchell goes to considerable length to differentiate photography from painting and other representative arts, relying primarily on the technological aspects of the medium. The autonomous, indexical photographic image stands for what photography *is*, in essence, according to Mitchell. But, as Mitchell is an advocate for the post-photographic split, a rupture in photography's identity comes in the form of the digital photograph. Mitchell carries forward the thinking on the technical aspects of photography in order to offer a similar differentiation between chemical and digital photography.

Mitchell argues that the technical specifications of photography—the recounted modernist formalist qualities of indexicality and automaticity—are no longer a given with the introduction of digital image making technologies. “Digital imaging,” claims Mitchell, “dramatically changes the rules of this game” (31). Since digital images rely on a different mechanical process, there's no promise that the resultant photographs are either indexical or automatic, ensuring that the “distinction between the causal process of the camera and the intentional process of the artist can no longer be drawn so confidently and categorically” (31). In this case, the suspect hand of the artist (or its digital equivalent) can enter into the process of image creation and alter aspects—like light intensity—that were previously the province of lens and exposure of the film stock. More

alarming, the image maker can intervene such that “image fragments from different sources may quickly and seamlessly be combined” into the final image, thus challenging its indexicality (31). For Mitchell, digital imaging takes away the qualities—indexicality and automaticity—that underpin the values of photography, its quality as an accurate and objective representation of the world. This relationship to nature, without the touch of the human hand, is what Mitchell claims was so convincing or persuasive about photographs, at least in the views of Berger, Bazin, Sontag, and others. Without these qualities, however, Mitchell suggests that photographs have lost some power, that, ultimately, “[t]he referent has come unstuck” (31).

But do the same limitations of the arguments about photographic process, as explored by Snyder and Allen, persist in the arguments about digital photographic process? Mitchell covers both ends of the narrative of photography—its difference from painting and from digital photography—in much the same way, and uses technical parameters, indexicality and automaticity, that map more or less directly on the visual and mechanical models that Snyder and Allen critique. On the one hand, the first set of technical specifications, the ones most pertinent to the modern formalist view, are already refuted, both by the paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism and by Snyder and Allen’s careful analysis, which emerged around the time of that shift (in the late 1970s and early 1980s). But the resilience of such thinking that Snyder mentions, the difficulty in fully refuting realist theories, might also play a role here. In a curious way, Mitchell’s concerns about digital photography reflect a concern with new or different challenges to

realist theories, challenges that originate in a technological difference that allows an active entry by the image-maker into the process of image capturing. Even if the modernist formalist views that Mitchell seems to claim as the norm in chemical photography don't hold up to scrutiny, the rhetorical function of such views—differentiating photography from other media—seems to remain. In the case of Mitchell's arguments about digital photography, the change in photographic *process* brought about by digital imaging technology might seem to suggest a valid difference in technology to go along with, to actually generate, a similar rhetorical function.

But responses to Mitchell suggest that such a possibility is not promising. Lev Manovich offers a point-by-point critique of the basis for Mitchell's claims that is reminiscent of Snyder and Allen's work both in its intent and its attention to technical detail. Manovich looks to counter three of the major differences that Mitchell draws between chemical and digital photography: the difference in replicability, the difference in amount of detail, and the inherent mutability of digital images. The issue with Mitchell's work, for Manovich, is one of focus. Mitchell, he claims, emphasizes the "abstract principles of digital imaging," which allows him to claim that the differences between analogue and digital images is significant, but considering "the concrete technologies and their uses" essentially erases this difference (Manovich 59). Like Snyder and Allen looking at photographic process, Manovich is curious about Mitchell's apparent lack of attention to the specific technical issues in digital photographic process.

On the first count, Mitchell sees a clear difference between analogue and digital photographs in terms of their reproduction. Analogue photographs are “continuous” in variation and tone; that is, the differences in exposure on the film and the subsequent variations in light and dark tones are smooth, continuous, and cannot be reduced to distinct increments of shading (Mitchell 6). Digital photographs, on the other hand, are composed of pixels, or discrete, uniform blocks of color that are easily replicable. For Mitchell, analogue images cannot be reproduced without degradation, as the continuous variations of tone cannot be replicated, but digital images can be copied exactly, as the tonal information in each pixel is digitally encoded and can be copied exactly an infinite number of times (6). Manovich admits that this is true, but only in principle (59). The realities of contemporary computer technology actually cause more degradation in the copying of digital images than might be seen in reproductions of analogue images. This is largely due to hardware and software limitations when dealing with the large amounts of data in a digital image: since digital image files are so large, they must be electronically compressed to be stored, manipulated, or transmitted, and this compression makes files smaller by deleting information (Manovich 59). Thus, the more a file is compressed, the less data it contains, and the more the image becomes visibly degraded. While this may not hold today, where images are transmitted electronically around the globe from mobile phones, the limitations of the time (1995) as described by Manovich certainly suggest some problems in the stark, absolutist difference in technology suggested by Mitchell and others.

The second proposed technical difference critiqued by Manovich is related, again, to the difference in makeup of the images: Mitchell claims that an analogue image contains an “indefinite amount of information” and, when enlarged, provides “more detail but yields a fuzzier and grainier picture” (6). On the other hand, a digital picture, due to its pixelated nature, has a “precisely limited spatial and tonal resolution and contains a fixed amount of information” (Mitchell 6). As a result, enlargements of digital images merely reveal the pixel grid. Here, again, Manovich concedes Mitchell’s point on principle, but, unlike the issue of reproduction, the amount of information difference is effectively negated by advancements in contemporary technology. Manovich observes that contemporary scanner technology allowed for high resolution images that actually afforded finer detail, even enlarged, than traditional photographs (60). Manovich even suggests that the comparative question is irrelevant next to the more important consideration of “how much information in an image can be useful to the viewer. Current technology has already reached the point where a digital image can easily contain much more information than anybody would ever want” (60). There’s some echo of Snyder and Allen here: if a statement such as ““what we would have seen had we been there ourselves”” requires such an amount of qualification as to be rendered pointless (152), then, likewise, two images may require such an amount of enlargement for comparison of quantity of information or detail that the resultant pictures may not offer much of value to the viewer.

But it is the final point in Manovich's critique of Mitchell that is the perhaps the most telling. As I've discussed above, Mitchell, along with a number of other post-photographic critics, claim that digital images are inherently manipulable since their processing occurs within a framework, the computer, that also contains tools used to alter images alongside the tools used to process them (7, 19). Interestingly, Manovich does not directly take issue with this particular formulation of the digital process but, unlike his previous critiques, he does not grant any explicit agreement in principle. Instead, Manovich observes that the distinction Mitchell draws is, itself, more broadly problematic. Mitchell acknowledges that photographs have, historically, been manipulated, but then suggests that compositing and manipulating *analogue* images is "technically difficult, time-consuming, and outside the mainstream of photographic practice," and that, when we look at photographs, "we presume, unless we have some clear indications to the contrary, that they have *not* been reworked" (7, emphasis in original). Manovich observes that Mitchell's formulation establishes "normal" photography as straight, unmanipulated photography, of the type practiced by Paul Strand, Edward Weston, and Ansel Adams—all high-modernist, "straight" photographers (Manovich 61). Further, Manovich claims that Mitchell's rhetorical move couples his idea of "normal" photography with realism more generally, which allows him to group montage, collage, and other forms as essentially digital, a move that actually evokes "two traditions of visual culture...[that] existed before photography" and span different media (Manovich 61). Once again, this is the postmodern critique, the one that draws a larger



circumference around the question and points to the importance of context, rather than some elusive essence, in understanding the question at hand.

The result of Manovich's critiques strikes me as very similar to the result of Snyder and Allen's work. On the one hand, Manovich's grasp of the specifications of the relevant technologies provides ample evidence to refute some of the specifics of process-focused claims about digital photography, namely the differences in replicability and amount of information. But in the third point, Manovich's critique, like Mitchell's argument, becomes a question of culture more than technology. Manovich points out that Mitchell attempts to deduce culture from technology; he in fact might do the opposite: his claim about how we *look* at images—what we “presume” about their accuracy—informs more of his reasoning on manipulation than the technical differences between analogue and digital photography (Manovich 61). This is a complication of Mitchell's main thesis, as Manovich sees it, that the differences between analogue and digital photography are “grounded in fundamental physical characteristics that have logical and cultural consequences” (qtd. in Manovich 59; Mitchell 4). Manovich argues, much like Lister, that this kind of argument entangles two registers, in this case, the specific technologies and larger issues with visual culture. This critique of the post-photography position, once again, circles back to technology's role, either as the focal point of photography's essence or as merely a part of a larger context of photographic culture. Manovich seems to have demonstrated, like Snyder and Allen, that views investing the essence of photography in its technology and process don't hold up to careful scrutiny.

## Rejection of Potentially Valid Arguments

But, just as Snyder suggests about illusion or copy theories, these critiques of post-photography, and Mitchell in particular, still might seem less than fully convincing. It seems quite reasonable that digital photographs are easier to manipulate than analogue, chemically developed photographs. And, in fact, arguments for continuity don't explicitly refute this, but rather contextualize it differently: as W.J.T. Mitchell argues, manipulation previously occurred in the dark room, but now occurs on the computer desktop. He concedes that this will lead to some erosion of the difference between professional and amateur photography, but not that there will be a wholesale upheaval in "truth statements" ("WJT Mitchell Lecture").

Here, I think, we meet the primary *barrier to communication* at this threshold of invisibility: arguments for post-photography, as I've suggested above, begin from the premise that a technological change will have, in William Mitchell's terms, "logical and cultural consequences" (4). Arguments for continuity, drawing primarily from the postmodern view, contextualize technological change within the whole of photographic culture, and hold modernist-formalist views on technology to be part of a rejected paradigm of thought on photography. As a result, and because formalist arguments can be refuted on technical grounds, the technological *and* cultural concerns of post-photography are considered of a piece and rejected as a whole. But it's possible that this is throwing out the baby with the bath water. Since arguments about technology draw material from terministic screens privileging a modernist, even a Cartesian view of

observable reality, they inevitably become entangled with debates about positivistic truth. This, in turn, seems to become entangled with the attendant ethical and culture concerns that may not necessarily draw their essence from the formalist notions that underpin the main thrust of the argumentation. This might leave the so-called cultural concerns of post-photography with some validity.

I'm suggesting here that focus on the stance of a writer within the broader conversation of digital imagery (do they value post-photography over photographic culture, or modernism over postmodernism, etc.) might override the concerns of that writer beyond what might be an *initial* philosophical question, and result in their arguments being summarily dismissed. What might be getting lost, then, are concerns regarding the ethics and personal uses of photography, issues that a number of critics acknowledge as important components in the discourse on photography more generally. To trace these concerns and their plight at this threshold of invisibility, I will briefly examine the effect of the modern versus postmodern discussion on Susan Sontag and then conclude with the readings (and mis-readings) of post-photography thinkers William Mitchell and Fred Ritchin.

Sontag offers an intriguing example of a so-called "realist" theorist with broader, ethical concerns that might not be acknowledged in critiques aimed at refuting modernist views. Price and Wells offer a fairly lengthy summary of Sontag's *On Photography*, one that touches on all of the major points she brings up, including her concerns about ethical knowledge (25), but, ultimately, Sontag is, for Price and Wells, an example of a realist

theorist, one who “takes a particular position within debates about realism, stressing the referential nature of the photographic image both in terms of its iconic properties and in terms of its indexical nature” (26). The stress here is on Sontag’s realist stance; while her concerns about ethics, the reasons that we take, look at, and save photographs, the emotions associated with photographs, and other facets of her work are mentioned, she seems to be, primarily, an example of a realist—or modernist, or formalist—thinker. Price and Wells acknowledge that her discussion in *On Photography* “veers between the reasons for taking photographs and the uses to which they are put” and includes a host of other concerns, but ultimately they “have the sense that meaning may be sought within the photograph, providing it has been well composed and therefore accurately traces a relic of a person, place or event” (25). She is not necessarily mischaracterized, but when she is mentioned in sources around the digital photography threshold of invisibility, it is primarily for the “death mask” idea and her dedication to indexicality.

But Sontag’s concerns are broader than the essence of the photograph, and might not be as easily reducible as Price and Wells suggest. While Sontag certainly does begin her commentary by pointing to the indexicality of a photograph, she suggests that the inventory of images, the availability of photographs, alter the way we see and interact with the world. These photographs “[teach] us a new visual code,” altering our “notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe;” they are “a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing” (3). On the one hand, these claims might be dismissed or refuted using some of the same arguments leveled against any view

privileging photographic technology; there's a hint of determinism in Sontag's phrasing, much like other such claims, where the photographs themselves (or the technology or processes used to create them) are the autonomous catalysts of some sort of cultural or social change. But, ultimately, Sontag finds fault in this sort of "education by photographs," and perhaps even the premise that meaning is located in the photograph itself. Whatever is gained from looking at photographs, "photographic knowledge," as Sontag calls it, "will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist...it will be knowledge at bargain prices—a semblance of knowledge, a semblance of wisdom" (24). Such knowledge, she argues, "while it can goad conscience," can "never be ethical or political knowledge" (24). This is most readily demonstrated by the focus on the *action* of photographing and how the desire to photograph, to capture a moment, seems to override the desire toward ethical or moral action in that moment:

Photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention. Part of the horror of such memorable coups of contemporary journalism as the pictures of a Vietnamese bronze reaching for the gasoline can, of a Bengali guerilla in the act of bayoneting a trussed-up collaborator, comes from the awareness of how plausible it has become, in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life, to choose the photograph. (Sontag 11-12)

While the examples here carry a bit of pathos—questions of life and death might seem as overly dramatic in such conversations as claims about the destruction of Truth—Sontag's emphasis, it seems to me, is nevertheless on the question of ethical action. Whether or not meaning resides in a photograph's indexicality seems, in this context, a relatively

unimportant issue. What individuals or groups do and how they interact, on the other hand, seems quite important.

Sontag, I would argue, is ultimately writing about photographic culture, about an ethics of seeing and acting, and, most notably for current discussions of digital images, about the effects of the dissemination of images, that world of images that educate (or mis-educate) viewers much like the shadows in Plato's cave (3). She worries about people having a "*compulsion* to photograph: to turn experience itself into a way of seeing" (24). This, ultimately, is an issue of ethical action—or inaction—that has broader social and cultural implications. In the final analysis, we might say that Sontag is not as concerned with the identity of photography, what photography *is*, but is very concerned with what photography—or photographic culture—*does*.

Again, there is likely a bit of hyperbole to such issues—choosing to take a picture or save a life—but at the very least, the concerns of Sontag and, I would suggest, of critics like William Mitchell and Fred Ritchin, might at least raise a valid question: what, if any, ethical ramifications might attend the widespread *use* of digital photography? Or, more to the point, is there something like Sontag's critique of ethical action in the work of critics advancing the post-photography argument?

The most reasonable answer is probably a firm "maybe." Like Sontag, writers advocating the post-photography perspective begin, mostly, with a modernist emphasis on the technology of photography and its indexicality. As I've argued above, this is the primary means they use to leverage the dissociation of the chemical/analogue and digital

photography pair. Subsequent arguments proceed from this modernist base. William Mitchell, as we've seen, argues that the technological and physical differences between analogue and digital photography "have logical and cultural consequences" (4). But, like the critiques of Sontag, the critiques of these writers mostly emphasize their apparent adherence to outmoded modernist views of photographic identity; furthermore, as is the case with both Lister and Manovich, such critiques observe that many of these writers have conflated or entangled questions of technology and culture, have, in a sense, drawn (invalid) philosophical or cultural conclusions from a faulty technological premise (the effects of technological determinism). But there do seem to be some ethical concerns worth considering in these arguments, though, ironically, they take a slightly different stance on the actions of photographers than Sontag.

Both William Mitchell and Fred Ritchin are concerned with the ethical actions of photojournalists and the potential destabilization of that profession's ethos due to the use of digital image editing. Ritchin, especially, argues forcefully that digital image technology might remove authorial control over images from photographers and place it in the hands of editors or other, unknown hands on account of the digital "pre-press" systems that now mediate between photographers and the printed page. Use of these systems, says Ritchin,

confronts editors with a new temptation: the image can quite easily be modified in its digital form. Too, the routine use of this technology makes it more accessible to a wide range of employees at a given publication, any of whom may become enamored with its image-altering possibilities. ("Photojournalism" 29)

Here again, of course, is the rhetoric of temptation: the possibility of manipulation makes it almost an inevitability, and Ritchin is certainly prone to this kind of sensationalism. Nevertheless, Ritchin does get at a practical reality: the intervening processes of digital images, since they run through a computer rather than the darkroom, grant access and some measure of control to more individuals. In the preface to the second edition of *In Our Own Image*, Ritchin reports that reactions to the original publication were strongest from photojournalists, primarily because they felt a sense of “powerlessness” in determining the use of their own images: “they felt editors and art directors control the ultimate destiny of their photographs and any protest would be nearly suicidal for their careers” (*In Our*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, xiv). In a sense, the computer mediation of journalistic images seems to allow for, even if it doesn’t directly (deterministically) cause, a shifting of the site of ethical consideration in image creation and use. We could also read this latter point—career suicide—as a problematic removal of agency, especially given the corporate concerns of modern journalism agencies.

This kind of concern is also prominent in William Mitchell’s *The Reconfigured Eye*. After working to (problematically) establish a modernist conception of photography as “normal” or “standard” photographic practice, Mitchell explores the implications of digital images as they work against that normal practice. The technical aspects of this shift have been discussed (and largely refuted) above, but the emphasis going forward for Mitchell is decidedly ethical. Some of this language is worth reproducing here:

For photojournalists, as we have seen, the ethical issues dramatically present themselves as ones of creative control, individual and institutional responsibility



for image content, and formulation of codes of conduct. Are press photographers to be reduced to little more than fleshy bipods—mobile supports for image capture devices that send streams of pictures back to an editor’s desk, where the crucial selection and framing decisions are made? Who controls the tonal and color qualities of an image—the photographer, photo editor, or computer graphics technician in the production department? (William Mitchell 55)

This particular passage is embedded in a discussion that features a host of other such rhetorical questions, including ones about guaranteeing the integrity of news images and, importantly, who “bears ultimate moral and legal responsibility” (William Mitchell 55). There is here, as with Ritchin, a slightly frantic pace and tone to these kinds of questions, which, of course, supports the arguments of Lister, Robins, and others that point to the “wide, and sometimes wild, speculation” prevalent in these discussions (Lister, “Introductory,” 2). But the response to these concerns—on moral, legal, and ethical responsibility—is, as I’ve mentioned, more concerned with the technological premise than the (possible) resultant ethical problems.

This is most readily obvious in Lister’s discussion of relevant conversations on digital images in Liz Well’s edited collection *Photography: A Critical Introduction*. In his essay, “Photography in the Age of Electronic Imaging,”<sup>26</sup> Lister largely targets arguments for post-photography while maintaining a stance that upholds the view towards continuity.<sup>27</sup> Lister’s critiques of Mitchell are by now familiar: Mitchell has a

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<sup>26</sup> The title, interestingly, evokes Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Previously, in the introduction to his own edited collection on digital images, Lister had included this sort of allusion—plays on Benjamin’s title—in the broader category of wide and wild speculation discussed above (“Introductory,” 1).

<sup>27</sup> Lister claims in the opening lines that “traditional mechanical and chemical process of photography have been *augmented* by the use of digital cameras” and other technology (“Photography” 305, emphasis added).

selective view of photographic practice (modernist views), ignores cultural context, and advances arguments that “tend to sail very close to a kind of technological determinism” (“Photography” 342). But his treatment of Ritchin reveals some of the *barrier to communication* elements that I’ve been exploring here. Where post-photographic arguments that tend toward “old equals bad” and “new equals good” oppositions are “ill-informed,” there are still, Lister claims, “a sense in which many practitioners feel that the ethics and politics of photographic representation are under threat” (“Photography” 332). This opens his discussion of Ritchin and Martha Rosler. Lister emphasizes Ritchin’s view of photography as “inherently truthful,” a quality that seems to inform all of his thinking (qtd. in Lister, “Introductory,” 333; Ritchin, “Photojournalism,” 28). Lister recounts much of Ritchin’s thinking, his beliefs that “traditional manipulations of photographs were somehow held in ethical check” and didn’t damage the integrity of the medium, and that digital imaging is a challenge to photography’s reliability (“Photography,” 333). Much of this overview is done without direct criticism, but Lister finishes with Ritchin’s “best argument” that equates photographers to writers—where authority is drawn from the ethos of the author and the institution. This, Lister claims, indicates that Ritchin “[f]inally...seems to accept that the value of the photographic image in a digital age will not be secured by tracing its truthfulness to its origins in a photo-chemical process” (“Photography” 335). In Lister’s estimation, this last idea brings Ritchin closer to Rosler, whose “more complex history of photography” allows her to claim that “photographic truth is based upon a set of historically and culturally specific beliefs about photographs

as documents” (“Photography,” 333). In short, Rosler’s arguments, proceeding as they do from the postmodern view, allow her more ethos in the discussion as Lister frames it.

Rosler, for her part, offers arguments about practical considerations that don’t differ too widely from Ritchin’s (or Mitchell’s) concerns. For Rosler, the “most immediate” effect of digital image processing will be felt by “those who work with still images—particularly photographers” (284). This will take the form of a “loss of relative autonomy for the professional photographer, who may become, like the TV news-camera operator, merely a link in the electronic chain of command” (Rosler 284). Rosler situates this change in part of a larger conversation about the effect of computers on work in general, and specifically the “loss of autonomy in the work process and loss of privacy because of monitoring” (285). There are significant issues here, not the least of which is surveillance and some related problems with the “intertwining of law enforcement and reportage” that Rosler sees as part of contemporary TV programming such as *America’s Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries* (294). The close relationship between the military and CNN during the first Gulf War is another such talking point (Rosler 295). While Ritchin’s concerns do tend a bit toward the Orwellian, he is nonetheless concerned with very similar problems: the “forfeit” of journalism’s “remaining power to steer us to issues that governments would rather ignore” and the possibilities of governmental deniability should photojournalism lose credibility (*In Our*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, viii, 4). Even William Mitchell, his histrionics about “fleshy bipods” aside, nevertheless points to these same concerns and to increased satellite imagery and surveillance as one product of the shift to a digital

paradigm (57). The ethical problems decried by post-photographic critics, while couched in a rhetoric given to hyperbole, nevertheless seem to have more in common with postmodern thinkers (such as Rosler) than initial inspection might indicate.

### **Readings, Mis-readings, and Mistaken Identity**

And this returns us to W.J.T. Mitchell's quips on mistaken identity. The confusion, however, is not so much one Mitchell for the other as what one particular Mitchell is actually saying. While the critics of post-photography generally seem thorough, if not relentless, how those critics seem to read and understand post-photography's proponents, especially William Mitchell, seems less consistent. I've only explored parts of *The Reconfigured Eye* here, but it's worth noting that it is a varied and sweeping text—and one that does not always offer a clear trajectory. This might be best illustrated by the unified—yet competing—criticisms. As we've seen with W.J.T. Mitchell's critique, as well as some of Lister's commentary and Manovich's point-by-point criticisms, William Mitchell seems to be taking a “defensive, rearguard position” that defends an outmoded view of photographic truth and technology and a reactionary view of photojournalistic ethics (Lister, “Photography,” 335). But the view of digital images in *The Reconfigured Eye* is a little harder to pin down. While much of William Mitchell's line of reasoning seems speculative—his list of frantic questions about the future of photojournalism attest to this quality—he also proposes a number of ways to understand digital images borrowed from a number of other discourses. For Mitchell, post-photography evokes the values of postmodernity in its tendency to privilege

“fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity” (8). This might trouble some, but encourage others. Mitchell suggests that while some will defend the institutions of journalism and the legal system, others thinkers might

see the emergence of digital imaging as a welcome opportunity to expose the *aporias* in photography’s construction of the visual world, to deconstruct the very ideas of photographic objectivity and closure, and to resist what has become an increasingly sclerotic pictorial tradition. (8)

Here and elsewhere, critical theory seems to haunt *The Reconfigured Eye*—Roland Barthes is evoked several times directly, but only in reference to his work explicitly dealing with photographs. Mitchell’s lengthy discussion leading into his string of rhetorical questions about photojournalists features a number of points about abandoning the notion of “the stable work,” of diminishing “authorial responsibility,” and the evaporation of the distinction “between producers and consumers of images” might well have originated in Barthes’ essays.<sup>28</sup>

This quality of looking both ways—some will defend the old ways, some celebrate the new—is also fairly common in *The Reconfigured Eye*, and it leads to some disjointed responses. Lister, for one, claims that Mitchell’s linking of post-photography with postmodernism “is largely metaphorical,” as there’s no indication that image technologies will always be used to such ends (“Photography” 339-340). (Lister, presumably, was also speaking metaphorically when he called photographs *intertextual*.) But Kevin Robins goes so far as to read Mitchell as an enthusiastic proponent of digital image technology. For Robins, “Mitchell’s hopes and expectations are invested in the

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<sup>28</sup> Most notably “The Death of the Author” and “From Work to Text,” both collected in *Image-Music-Text*.

new digital technologies” (34). The evidence for this view comes from Mitchell himself: the new technologies are “relentlessly destabilizing the old photographic orthodoxy, denaturing the established rules of graphic communication, and disrupting the familiar practices of image productions and exchange” (qtd. in Robins 34; Mitchell 223). But Robins stops a little short of quoting the full thought in Mitchell’s text. The destabilization mentioned above “demands, with increasing urgency, a fundamental critical reappraisal of the uses to which we put graphic artifacts, and the ethical principles that guide our transactions with them” (Mitchell 223). I read this more as a call to action than a celebration, and that reading feels justified by Mitchell’s brief concluding chapter, which speaks of a loss of “false innocence” and the adoption of “a far more wary and more vigilant interpretive stance,” while mourning the “tragic elusiveness of the Cartesian dream” (225). Mitchell’s text is, at best, ambivalent on the digital age, and, as a result, it seems to capture—and was a catalyst for—much of the confusion of the discourse surrounding digital photography.

Ultimately, I’ve covered only a part of this large scale conversation on digital photography, but what the chapter does demonstrate is two key elements of a threshold of invisibility: the tendency to *narrativize* and *barriers to communication* resulting from the convergence of terministic screens. In this case, two competing narrativizations—for discontinuity and for continuity in photographic practice—provided the jumping off point for an analysis of the deep-seated factors influencing arguments about digital photography. The underlying commitments to particular philosophical views—modernist

and postmodern—informed but also complicated the arguments in play. Attempts to speak across the threshold were complicated by the revival of an old paradigm that was largely refuted, and as a result, arguments that bore marks of that paradigm—modernist formalism—were often refuted or dismissed regardless of their similarity in concern or common ground. As I hope to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the threshold of invisibility concepts allows us to direct our critical attention to such moments and analyze the jumble of critical discourse. As we'll see in the next chapters, the issues—even the arguments—that arose at this threshold bear a resemblance, and might even influence, issues that arise at other thresholds.

## **Interchapter Two: Paradigms in Film History and Criticism**

One of the core elements of a threshold of invisibility is some form of *narrativization* to contextualize the moment of change. This particular element can sometimes occur with two or more competing narratives—such a scenario was on display in Chapter Two, as different voices suggested different means of accounting for digital technology in discourse on photography. These narratives are often disseminated beyond their parent disciplines and sometimes influence discourse at other thresholds of invisibility. Kuhn’s scientific revolution model offers one view of this kind of dissemination, where “misconstructions” of paradigm shifts and revolutions are found most often in textbooks and popular histories of science (140). Presumably, this is what allows for the post-transition narratives to spread beyond the bounds of their parent discipline. In my own model of thresholds of invisibility, I suggest that situations arise where such narratives are subsequently applied and referenced in other disciplines and discourses—they can even be accepted to the point that they form what Stephen Toulmin calls warrants, the assumptions and generalizations that allow data and evidence to support argumentative claims.<sup>29</sup> While the dissemination of these kinds of ideas is

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<sup>29</sup> There are also some cases where enough of a pattern is established that iterations of a particular kind of narrative, like the drive to the narrative film, are used as data for claims about new forms. Chapter 3 will discuss some of these instances, such as the use of the “development of film towards narrative” as evidence to support speculation on the development of video games.



certainly not itself a problem, issues can arise when disciplines make use of older received narratives from other disciplines. Once entered into public or non-disciplinary discourse, the narrative may persist even past the point of subsequent transitions in the parent discipline—that is, the paradigm may have fallen out of favor or even been proven erroneous. As a result, discourse in other disciplines may be shaped by assumptions long since defunct in the parent discipline, which may have encountered and passed a new threshold of invisibility. This kind of problem is prevalent enough in discourse on new media and forms that it, along with some other issues, warrants a separate, if brief examination. I will discuss how these “travelling” narratives interact with different thresholds of invisibility in Chapter Three, but for now I will cover a particular paradigm shift that has exerted some considerable influence beyond its own discipline.

Film history and theory (prior to about 1978) held that the period of the early cinema, from about 1895 to perhaps 1910, was a period of experimentation and exploration into the techniques of filmmaking—camera placement, continuity editing, analytical editing, and so on—that would allow for films to successfully convey narrative and achieve the heights of the current paradigm in cinema, the narrative feature film. Films from this “primitive” period, then, were often examined for their contributions to the narrative project and evaluated in terms of their “progress” toward this end. Newer work in Film Studies, however, has suggested that this view of early cinema was perhaps unduly influenced by the dominance of the narrative film: scholars and historians may

have been looking for material in early cinema that matched up with the contemporary norm rather than considering early silent films in their own right and in their own context.

This interchapter aims to complicate the “received” history of Early Cinema that portrays the time period as a story of almost systematic, inexorable progress toward the enshrinement of the narrative film as the exemplar of cinematic practice. To do so, I will explore a more recent paradigm that follows a transitional period in cinema studies in the late 1970s and through the 1980s. During this transition, film scholars and historians placed particular emphasis on the films of the Early Cinema and their context, exploring a number of important features of the time period—spectacle and spectatorship, exhibition practices, economic and legal influences—that complicated the widely accepted views of the development of the narrative film. Crucially, the new views of film history do not utterly reject the role of narrative in the cinema or its development; instead, they position narrative as one of many forces at work in the “primitive” cinema whose dominance came about as a result of a number of interrelated factors and not, as the old view held, because of some inherent predisposition of film toward storytelling—a kind of “narrative determinism.” By complicating narratives of development in the cinema, I will argue—here and in later chapters—that these kinds of assumptions, in this case accepted narratives, form a major component of the disciplinary orientations that influence discourse at various thresholds of invisibility.

First, I’d like to summarize the idea of cinema’s drive toward narrative, or the version of film history that views Early Cinema in this way. Simply put, this view of

Early Cinema sees every aspect of cinema—the films, the filmmakers, the film production companies, the exhibitors, and all associated practices—as contributing to a developmental process that culminated in the multi-reel, feature length narrative film that became (and remains to this day) the dominant expression of the medium in the mid to late 1910s.<sup>30</sup> This process was one of both technology and technique. The equipment had to be developed to accommodate longer films than the brief novelties and actualities of Edison’s kinoscope (a peep-show-like box with a viewfinder for a single viewer) and the Lumière brothers’ cinématographe (a combined camera-projector that could project films on a wall or screen). In addition, techniques of filmmaking needed to be established—or, perhaps, “pioneered” or “discovered”—that would allow films to convey a coherent diegetic space and narrative progression. These aspects of film technique, taken for granted today, include parallel editing or cross-cutting (intercutting two different scenes that are presumed to be occurring simultaneously), standardization of shots and shot length (placement of the camera at nine feet from the actors to make them appear at a “natural” distance from the viewer), and continuity editing (an approach to editing that smooths over transitions between shots into a logical sequence).<sup>31</sup> Because many these kinds of techniques appear in the early work of the iconic filmmaker D.W. Griffith—especially during his time at the Biograph company from 1908-1913—he is

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<sup>30</sup> The established dates for historical periods in the history of cinema are an issue of considerable debate, but the feature film was certainly the dominant form by the early 1920s.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, if a ball is thrown by a character from the left of the shot off-screen right, the ball would be seen in the next shot traveling into the shot from off-screen left.

often crediting with the creation of classical filmmaking technique. The historical paradigm that dominates this view of film history, then, examines films of the time period in relation to the feature length narrative norm seemingly pioneered (single-handedly) by Griffith. Historians seemed to examine films primarily for the presence of narrative technique, and films were considered important or irrelevant based on their perceived contributions to the narrative project. The culmination of this development was the establishment of the Classical Hollywood system in the mid-1920s, and this finalized the “progression” of early cinema toward the narrative paradigm.

The old paradigm is on display most prominently in the works of film historians such as Terry Ramsaye, Lewis Jacobs, and Jean Mitry. These writers seem to judge films from the “primitive” period as just that—primitive—based on criteria and conventions established later. The value of such films, in this view, is what they can contribute to later advancements toward “expressive” (narrative) cinema. Mitry suggests that Edwin Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is “considerably outmoded, [but] carries in it the seeds of cinematic expression and remains, in the face of history, the first film that was really cinema” (qtd. in Gaudreault and Gunning 370). Likewise, Jacobs sees Porter’s film as limited by “youth,” and goes on to list a host of shortcomings:

Every shot...was a long shot, its action being confined to the proscenium-limited stage area...Foreground and middle ground were equally ignored...Tension and excitement were achieved by a quickening of the players’ movements rather than by variation of the lengths of the shots. (46)

He ends by concluding that it demonstrated “the kinetic possibilities of the new technique” (Jacobs 46). In sum, Jacob’s idea of “youth” is here a lack of knowledge of

editing conventions established later, the lack of which provides grounds for criticism.

But both he and Mitry see *The Great Train Robbery* as the first “real” example of cinema, as it demonstrates certain editing and certain approaches that would later become dominant.

And, in the old paradigm, it is those editing conventions, and the pioneering work of Griffith, that allows (narrative) cinema to be born. For Jacobs, it is editing that “makes a film expressive,” and the principles of editing are, notably, discoveries rather than codified techniques (38, 46). For Terry Ramsaye, that expressiveness required an artist’s touch, as after the novelty period (late 1890s), “[t]he screen had nothing to say. The novelty of pictures that moved was gone. Authorship was lacking. The potentialities of the screen art were as pigment on the palette with no artist to transfer them to canvas” (394). Jacobs, likewise, saw lack of artistry as a problem, even in Edwin Porter who, before *The Great Train Robbery*, had made films for years “without showing any notable signs of originality” (36). But this problem was to be rectified by Griffith, who is credited under this particular view of film history as the primary author or artist who created the modern cinema. Jacobs credits Griffith with “[s]ensing from the beginning the need for a body of technique to catch and control the emotions of the spectator,” a contribution more unique and greater than that of “any other man of his day” (95). For Ramsaye, Griffith provided nothing less than the full education of the cinema:

Griffith began to work out a syntax of screen narration. He started to use the close-up for accents, and fade-outs for punctuation. With cutbacks and manipulations of sequence, he worked for new intensities of suspense. The

motion picture spent the years up to 1908 learning its letters. Now, with Griffith, it was studying screen grammar and pictorial rhetoric. (508)

The process of education is similar to other metaphors deployed within this particular historical paradigm. Jacobs argues that film “evolve[d]” from “bits of passing movement” to “the ability to tell stories of their own making” (11). All such metaphors speak to a particular narrative: that cinema grew from something primitive, through some stages of youth, to a fully developed art form that is characterized by particular techniques and narrative qualities.

This conception of Early Cinema, found in the work of Ramsaye, Jacobs, and Mitry, began to be interrogated more rigorously in the 1980s. Many scholars identify the 1978 FIAF (Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film) conference in Brighton, England as a turning point in film historicism. The conference involved an exhibition of hundreds of preserved fiction films made between 1900 and 1906, an “extensive and systematic viewing process that radically changed (Old) Film History” (Strauven 15). Charles Musser observes that the Brighton conference provided a number of opportunities:

That conference was really the first time that film scholars from Europe and North America could look systematically at most of the surviving fiction films made between 1900 and 1906. It brought together scholars who had been working in relative isolation and created a critical mass for intellectual inquiry. Moreover, it helped to inaugurate a new relationship between the archives and the larger scholarly community (a relationship today’s graduate students might easily take for granted). (“Rethinking” 389)

The post-Brighton years, for Musser, were marked by cooperative and productive scholarship that ultimately led to a rejection of the previous paradigms about the Early

Cinema (“Rethinking” 389), and both Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault acknowledge the importance of the Brighton conference for their own work on the concept of “attractions” and film history in the mid-1980s (Strauven 15). The Brighton conference, then, provided an opportunity for film scholars, historians, and theorists to view many of the remaining films from a time period that film history had largely dismissed as “primitive” or “naïve,” a designation that did not hold up in the viewing. The disparity between established thought on the time period and the actuality of the surviving films created an exigency for the re-consideration of film history and theory.

Scholarship following the Brighton conference, unsurprisingly, was critical of the old paradigm. The most obvious problem of the old film history was its oppressively teleological bent. The narrative film became an endpoint that inscribed a process of discovery onto a period of film history that had no such recognizable cohesion. Gaudreault and Gunning identify the implied assumptions of this view of film history as follows:

1. A language specific to cinema exists for which the code is relatively limited.
2. This specific language is that which must ultimately, necessarily, have ended up dominating film practice.
3. The period of early cinema is nothing but a crucible which should have allowed this form of specificity to reveal itself. (370)

Early Cinema is thus judged from these assumptions via criteria (the qualities of a narrative film) that had not yet been articulated. The specific “film language” assumed here, or the narrative film marked by a coherent system of form—involving continuity, parallel editing, and shot standardization—so standard in the Classical Hollywood system, was used as an evaluative framework for films made before the conditions for that system were extant. The inexorability of the narrative film’s dominance is assumed after its rise to prominence—a kind of technical or technological determinism that ends up ignoring many of the contemporary forces that influenced the cinema. In the narrative paradigm, film language became both the goal and the animating force of Early Cinema, regardless of socio-economic context.

Reactions (and rebuttals) to the teleological historicization of old film history post-Brighton involved an extensive re-mapping of the time period. For Musser, the new historians

rejected the prevailing paradigm that viewed films of the pre-Griffith era as either simpler versions of later classical cinema or naïve and often mistaken gropings toward a natural cinematic language. This new history considered these early films as cultural works on their own terms rather than as mere precursors to a subsequent canon of artistic masterpieces. (“Rethinking” 389)

This approach moved away from what Gunning calls “the hegemony of narrative films, [where] early filmmakers like Smith, Méliès and Porter have been studied primarily from the viewpoint of their contribution to film as a storytelling medium” (“The Cinema” 56).

Thomas Elsaesser portrays the new historians of film as re-examining

those accounts which told the history of the cinema as the story of fearless pioneers, of 'firsts', of adventure and discovery, of great masters and masterpieces... [They] queried the textbooks in the name of different



determinants (mainly demographic, economic, industrial, technological.  
("Introduction [to Part I]" 3)

This search for different "determinants" allowed scholars to see relations between film and the relevant forces—economic, industrial, etc.—of the day while also establishing more productive links between the cinema and other, less heralded "entertainments" such as vaudeville, penny arcades, and traveling exhibitions—a stark departure from the narrow comparisons often made in the old history between film and novels and plays (Elsaesser, "Introduction [to Part I]" 33). The result of this work is a conception of film history wherein cinema turned to narrative not simply "as the consequence of the urge for storytelling," but as the result of a complex of forces that made narrative the most convenient form to meet the economic, social, and industrial needs—of spectators, exhibitors, filmmakers, and distributors—that intersected at the central point of the filmic medium (Elsaesser and Barker 293).

With an expanded view of the forces influencing the Early Cinema, scholars began to present new and expanded models and concepts that attempted to account for the multiplicity of elements in film form. Crucially, this did not entail a rejection of the role of narrative in Early Cinema, but rather an examination of that role and its relation to other aspects of early film. Donald Crafton, for instance, suggests a view of early slapstick comedies that accounts for both gags and the narrative. Crafton argues that under the old film history, slapstick films were derided due to a lack of narrative coherence. In that view, there was "an implicit valorization of narrative over gags. These films [comedies] are flawed because the elements of slapstick are not 'integrated' with

other elements” (355). The “failing point” of comedies, then, was the inability to integrate gags into the narrative or to assemble some semblance of narrative coherence from both narrative elements (like characters, structure, etc.) and the inherently non-narrative gags. But Crafton contends that this is not, in fact, a failing, but an issue of misinterpretation: “The distinction between slapstick and narrative has been properly perceived, but incorrectly interpreted. I contend that it was never the aim of comic filmmakers to ‘integrate’ the gag elements of their movies, or to subjugate them to narrative” (356). Where the old historical paradigm would conclude that these comedic films inevitably fail because of this lack of intent (and are thus not worth considering), Crafton claims that they, in fact, succeed in their goals:

[T]he separation between the vertical, paradigmatic domain of slapstick – the arena of spectacle I will represent by the metaphor of the thrown pie – and the horizontal, syntagmatic domain of the story – the arena of the chase – [can be seen as] a calculated rupture, designed to keep the two elements antagonistically apart. (356)

While intent is always a difficult quality to quantify, Crafton’s complication of the older paradigm, which used the presence of one quality (the gag) to disqualify the film as a whole, is notable in its insistence on consideration of both gags and narrative when examining comedies from the Early Cinema period, even if he makes a considerable effort to keep the two qualities separate.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> There are most likely ways to examine Crafton’s distinction via narrative theory, but his argument is useful here not for its narratological rigor but for its clear departure from the older historical paradigm.

In a related, but far more well-known essay, Tom Gunning proposes a different framework for considering early cinema: “the cinema of attractions.”<sup>33</sup> For Gunning, early films (to about 1906) are marked more by a desire “to show something” than to narrate, a tendency toward exhibitionism more grounded in spectacle than story (“The Cinema” 57). Unlike the older paradigm, which focused solely on narrative filmmaking, Gunning sees the cinema of attractions overcoming the seeming opposition between narrative and non-narrative films by “[uniting] them in a conception that sees cinema less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of their illusory power ... and exoticism” (“The Cinema” 57). In this model, the dominant feature of cinema is the spectacle or the attraction that catches the attention of the spectator. During the time period, and especially in the early stages of the cinema, the cinematic apparatus itself was part of the spectacle, and exhibitors drew crowds both for the “views” presented by a film and for the novelty of the technology itself; in many cases the latter was the primary draw (Gunning, “The Cinema” 58). The content of films was often drawn from a wide range of subjects, though unified around the central concept of the attraction:

... the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself. The attraction to be displayed may also be of a cinematic nature, such as the early close-ups just

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<sup>33</sup> Though the original essay, entitled “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde” appeared in a 1986 issue of *Wide Angle*, I will cite a later edition, published in Thomas Elsaesser’s 1990 anthology *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*. Gunning considers this to be the “final” and “complete” version of the essay (“Attractions” 33). The anthology version includes an additional, summary paragraph and changed the singular “Attraction” of the title to the plural “Attractions.”

described, or trick films in which a cinematic manipulation (slow-motion, reverse motion, substitution, multiple exposure) provides the film's novelty. Fictional situations tend to be restricted to gags, vaudeville numbers or re-creations of shocking or curious incidents (executions, current events). (Gunning, "The Cinema" 58-59)

Like Grafton's argument about gags, Gunning clearly delineates the distinction between the older paradigm, which gauged films in terms of their contribution to the development of narrative, and many of the films that make up a cinema of attractions, which in this model made no effort to conform to a particular approach to narrative nor to present films that strove for narrative coherence. In the cinema of attractions, the exhibitors promoted an exhibition that could draw attention in its own right.

But the most dominant feature of the cinema of attractions, and the one that most clearly distinguishes it from diegetically coherent narrative films, is the direct address to the spectator. This may take the form of a scantily clad actress winking at the camera, the knowing smile of a comedian directed to the audience, or any number of other ruptures of the diegetic space of the film. In this way,

theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe...[the] energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative. (Gunning, "The Cinema" 59)

Thus, the cinema of attractions is typified by a self-referentiality, or acknowledgement of the roles of spectator and spectacle. This quality, ultimately, informs the division between a cinema of attractions and a cinema of narrative. From 1907 to about 1913, the cinema's turn to narrative reordered the priorities of film form. During the "narrativization" of cinema,

the look at the camera becomes taboo and the devices of cinema are transformed from playful 'tricks' – cinematic attractions (Melies gesturing at us to watch the lady vanish) – to elements of dramatic expression, entries into the psychology of character and the world of fiction. (Gunning, "The Cinema" 60)

The common rupturing of diegesis, breaking the so-called "fourth wall," was no longer acceptable in cinematic practice. Again, this was not as a result of the "inevitable" turn to narrative, and the narrative form is not somehow "innately superior" to the cinema of attractions. Indeed, Gunning claims that the rise of narrative should not be read as a "Cain and Abel story," in which narrative murders attraction, as the cinema of attractions never really disappeared but, rather, "went underground" ("The Cinema" 60, 57). There is still a considerable air or spectacle around the cinema, despite the dominance of narrative, in the form, for instance, of special effects. Importantly, in Gunning's concept, neither narrative nor spectacle have been the sole feature of cinema at any time, but have been, in a variable ratio, in dialectic throughout cinema history ("The Cinema" 61).

In an essay written for the twentieth anniversary of the first publication of his article, Gunning would clarify some of his points and reemphasize the relationship between narrative and spectacle. The cinema of attractions was never intended to be a label for a particular time period in cinema, but rather a description of the dominant quality (ala the Russian Formalists) of the cinema in its first decade, from 1895 to about 1906 ("Attractions" 36). Responding to Grafton's work, Gunning proposes that the gag, rather than being the diametric opposite of the narrative, is a sort of "relay" between attractions and narrative, as they have more in common with the narrative than the

attractions he describes (“Attractions” 37). Finally, and most importantly, he suggests that he proposed the idea

as a tool for critical analysis of early films and as a means of describing the differences between various periods of film history. Its value lies ultimately in how it opens up films and generates discussion, in a historically specific and analytically detailed manner, of the nature of film spectatorship. (Gunning, “Attractions” 38)

Unlike a rigid model where progression toward a specific end informs (or controls) analysis of individual films, Gunning, along with many of the “new” historians, suggests a more generative model of criticism that accounts for divergent and sometimes competing forces that influenced the early cinema.

It is important to note, however, that the new approach to film history did not merely replace one universally accepted paradigm with another. There is considerable, though productive, disagreement on how to view both the early cinema and how to discuss the adoption of the new paradigm. First and foremost, though scholars point to the 1978 Brighton conference as a critical turning point in film history and scholarship, those same scholars observe that the conference itself had some important limitations. Elsaesser observes that the conference featured only fictional and multi-shot films, thus ignoring actualities (a particularly common kind of film in the early days of cinema) and single-shot films of various lengths (“Introduction [to Part I]” 16). Likewise, Charles Musser, while affirming that the “traditional historiography” of the march to narrative is “now in disrepute,” points to some of the notable shortcomings of the Brighton conference: “it drew our attention away from the 1890s and encouraged us to think of the pre-Griffith cinema as a single period. It also kept our attention focused on fiction film

when actualities were the dominant form until around 1903-1904” (“Rethinking” 394, 400). Brighton, despite its importance drew attention only to specific elements—specifically fiction films—of early cinema, implicitly rolling films from 1895-1900 into a larger group despite not exhibiting them. Musser suggests an alternative, more specific set of period distinctions in early cinema, including a “novelty period” (1895-1896) and a period of “shared” responsibilities between production companies and exhibitors from 1897-1901 or 1903, to make up for this deficiency (“Rethinking” 400-401).

In addition, Musser suggests that newer views of early cinema, including Gunning’s proposed cinema of attractions, still do not adequately account for a tremendously important aspect of cinema at the time: exhibition practice. Approaches to early cinema too often focus on film as an object rather than on “cinema as a practice” (“The Travel” 123). As a result, film histories and theories focus too specifically on the content and form of films and do not always include considerations of how films were exhibited. Exhibitors had a tremendous degree of control over the films they showed, often editing different films together into a program and providing some sort of lecture or other performative addition to the exhibition. As such, looking at films from the period, especially non-narrative films, as self-contained can be problematic, since

such films may appear to be non-narrative, but in the process of becoming cinema, that is, as part of a larger program of projected motion pictures for an audience, they often came to function in a radically different manner – as components of narrative. A film that acted as an isolated, discrete, non-narrative moment in one program was routinely integrated into a larger narrative in another. (Musser, “Rethinking” 400)

Editorial control of films, then, was often in contention through Musser's various periods of development of early cinema. Musser concludes that exhibitors and exhibition must be accounted for, and, due to this element, the cinema of attractions is really only dominant in the early stages of film history, from 1895 to 1897 ("Rethinking" 412).<sup>34</sup>

An additional complication of the meeting of the old and new paradigms in film studies is the difficult status of D.W. Griffith. Griffith's work is still regarded as important, if not quite as messianic as it was under the older paradigm, but due to the shift away from valorizing Griffith as the pioneer of the narrative film, he has become a target for criticism. Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker suggest that Griffith is caught between two extremes:

Griffith's work will always provide the ultimate challenge to the student of early cinema, if only because for so long, his was virtually the only historiographically examined manifestation of the period, often the sum total of what was known about early cinema. In a corrective counter-move, the toppling of Griffith as the father of classical cinema and inventor of narrative film-making has become a ritual act of parricide among film scholars. (293)

The tensions between the two paradigms play out strongly in scholarship on Griffith's work: he is either major figure or nobody. While the newer views may swing in some cases too far in reaction to older views now in "disrepute," the important aspect of this

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<sup>34</sup> My reading of Gunning may be somewhat more charitable than Musser's. Musser claims that the cinema of attractions was only dominant from 1895-1897, but that afterwards it "stands in dialectical relation to the numerous, sustained efforts at cinematic storytelling that were present from the 1890s onward" ("Rethinking" 412). I see Gunning as making more or less this claim in his original essay, and especially in his reflections in 2006. That said, Musser specifically limits the dominance of the cinema of attractions, while Gunning does not necessarily draw such clearly defined borders. It's also worth noting that both scholars are in dialogue and not necessarily in opposition to each other. Gunning claims that Musser was instrumental in his thinking on attractions ("Attractions" 37), and Musser described the cinema of attractions as "an important and highly influential intervention in the film studies field" ("Rethinking" 390).



problem, for this project, is that Elsaesser and Barker are able to identify the presence of these two extremes and locate their origin. While the last few paragraphs have illustrated that the new paradigm has its contentious points, it is still possible for critics working in that paradigm to recognize their own disagreements, a huge difference from a casually accepted or presumed narrative of film's development.

This complication of film history's view of early cinema is not necessarily meant to champion any particular perspective. It is important to note that the new paradigm is more widely accepted in the field, but I have not dedicated a particularly large amount of space to its explication and defense. Rather, I want to observe that narratives, even broadly accepted ones, form portions of orientations that exert some influence on discourse at a threshold of invisibility. In this particular case, the confluence of forces on cinematic media means that simple narratives of development—of a quick and easy march toward the dominance of the narrative film—are not inclusive enough, and this effectively undermines positions that take such narratives for granted. In the next chapter, I will explore some of the ways that views such as the ones examined here can influence arguments at different thresholds of invisibility.

### **Chapter Three: Video Games and the Narratology Versus Ludology (Non-)Debate**

As we've seen in the past two chapters, new technological developments often signal overexcited responses. These sometimes tend toward the Manichean. As Baron suggests, there's often a negative, Luddite reaction to newer technologies, and digital photography and its discourse seems to have bred both that negativity and its opposite, that excitement that Robins and others somewhat derisively labeled "techno-euphoria." But these perspectives are also curiously difficult to quantify. Baron deftly observes that most Luddites aren't against technology, per se, but instead favor older, "naturalized" technologies. And for all the criticism of techno-euphoria, Robins, Lister, and others are surprisingly sparing with direct references or citations to such views, and when they do engage directly with other writers, like William Mitchell, the results, as we've seen, are mixed—Mitchell's views ended up being more complicated, which, in turn, complicates the Luddite/technoeuphoria dichotomy. Nevertheless, these kinds of sentiments are persistent, and this chapter will examine a threshold of invisibility marked by considerable enthusiasm—and just as much confusion.

As video games became more widely available and commercially successful in the late 1990s, scholars and critics began to take notice. But with increased interest, the attendant difficulties of studying a new medium became clear. Early efforts to examine video games were, unsurprisingly, mixed, and some attempts were so narrow in approach

that they generated considerable backlash—both fair and exaggerated. One such effort, by literary scholar and educational programmer Janet Murray, became infamous for its view of a game as, essentially, a story. Murray’s reading is worth reproducing here at length:

Even a game with no verbal content, like Tetris, the wildly popular and powerfully absorbing game of the early 1990s, has clear dramatic content. In Tetris irregularly shaped objects keep falling from the top of the screen and accumulating at the bottom. The player’s goal is to guide each individual piece as it falls and position it so that it will fit together with other pieces and form a uniform row. Every time a complete row forms, it disappears. Instead of keeping what you build, as you would in a conventional jigsaw puzzle, in Tetris everything you bring to a shapely completion is swept away from you. Success means just being able to keep up with the flow. This game is a perfect enactment of the over tasked lives of Americans in the 1990s – of the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught. (*Hamlet* 143-144)

Tetris, a game designed by a computer engineer in the former Soviet Union, does not explicitly contain the thematic or dramatic content that Murray describes as an “enactment,” and she later clarified that this account was based on player experience (Murray, “The Last Word”). But even this clarification raises some of the same basic questions that the reading itself does: is this kind of analogical reading, for lack of a better term, useful in examining games, either this game specifically or games in general? Murray’s reading seems to overlook some important factors—the game itself, its mechanics, etc.—in favor of what might be called audience experience. This is potentially problematic for a number of reasons. On the surface, video games are materially different from other media, especially codex texts and film or television. Games require some kind of input or physical manipulation, unlike film or television, and

they respond in some substantive fashion to that input, unlike texts. At the same time, games range from the almost purely abstract—moving different shapes to solve puzzles—to involved role-playing games, complete with (digital) swords and dragons. As such, scholars, primarily from the humanities, encountered some difficulty when attempting to apply established theoretical frameworks to such a varied new problem. Some of the sterner reactions to this kind of work suggested that Murray and others were ignoring games entirely and attempting to roll them into broader, pre-existing categories of study, such as literature and drama, that privileged narrative over actual gameplay and game structure.

Partially as a result of these kinds of reactions, a dispute broke out between competing groups of game scholars regarding the essential nature of the video game medium. One camp, dubbed the “narratologists,” claimed that games could (or should) be primarily understood as narratives, and that story elements in games are what make them attractive to players. The other camp, who called themselves “ludologists” (derived from the Latin *ludus*, or game/play), argued that video games are distinct from other media, and are composed primarily (or exclusively) of systems of rules that govern player interaction; narrative, for the ludologists, was not only irrelevant to games but actually inimical. The debate, dubbed the “Narratology vs. Ludology Debate,” is notable for its apparent extremism—both “sides” seem to reduce complex, multimodal works to “mere” stories or rules, respectively. The debate took place primarily in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Given how new such discussions were, works on games were fairly centralized.

There were a handful of texts early on—notably Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck* and Espen Aarseth’s *Cybertext*—but much of the discussion took place in the (digital) pages of the Aarseth edited *Game Studies* journal (2001-present), at various conferences—most centrally at the biannual Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference—and in edited collections such as Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan’s *First Person*, which also included a wealth of printed and online responses and rebuttals. All in all, the scope of the debate was much more narrow, and more focused, than discussions on digital photography. Still, the debate is notable for its intensity and divisiveness.

But then again, to even call this disagreement a “debate” probably oversimplifies the convergence of discursive forces at this particular moment: only one “side,” the so-called ludologists, framed the discussion in debate terms, and, as I will discuss below, they did so mostly to establish a particular position—one dedicated to discontinuity—primarily for political reasons. It’s actually quite difficult to adequately account for this particular discussion, so much so that all of the following characterizations, some of them actually made as part of the disagreement, become accurate: The disagreement occurred as scholars began to explore the literary potential of newer forms—“cybertexts” in general and computer games in particular—and contextualize them in a larger view of “texts” across media. Alternatively, the disagreement involved scholars of the newer forms critiquing the uncritical, implicitly narrative-focused approaches of scholars in literary studies and other disciplines that reduced games to merely a subset or subsidiary

form of stories writ large—an attempt to “colonize” the newer disciplines for ideologies long present in the literary establishment. Exchanges were marked by both sides leveling accusations of ideological bias formed out of poorly defined or misused terms. The disagreement took place between scholars who relied on older, “pre-theory” critical approaches and scholars who found theory-based critical approaches insufficient. Arguments on both sides reflected a ubiquitous discomfort with the direction and output of the computer game industry, with the presence of “story” either an active detriment to more positive development or a harbinger of better things to come—and a potential guide to a brilliant period of literary output. Interestingly, the “sides” of the disagreement are constantly shifting, and the “opposition” is rarely composed of anything but straw men.

In short, this particular moment of transition—as scholars began to seriously examine video games in the late 1990s and early 2000s—forms a particularly turbulent threshold of invisibility. The threshold of invisibility framework, in fact, is useful here as a means to organize and examine this issue, as this particular threshold combines all four of the elements I’ve described—*habituation* of terms or ideas, a *barrier to communication*, competing *narrativizations*, and some confusion of *synchronic and diachronic* qualities<sup>35</sup>. This allows for careful consideration of the various forces and terministic screens that converge in this “debate.”

Habituation is a key component at this threshold, as it partially informs the other three elements. Scholars accustomed to terms and frames used to examine other media,

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<sup>35</sup> See my definitions in Chapter One.

such as literature (and primarily narrative fiction), attempt to apply them to video games with, as we've already seen, mixed success. In response, a number of critics argue forcefully that older terms and frameworks are inadequate to account for the new medium, and call for the establishment of new terms. This split is then enacted, explicitly, in competing narrativizations about the medium's place in broader discussions. Some scholars argue for continuity, or a place for video games in existing discourses on, for instance, literature and drama. Other critics argue for discontinuity, for the establishment of a new discipline that breaks from established discourses that these thinkers view as limiting. But these arguments for discontinuity have an additional complicating factor: they seek primarily to establish a new discipline within the context of academic institutions, leaving them curiously circumscribed inside a different argument for continuity. In other words, the arguments for discontinuity are still shaped, in part, by a desire for continuity, which makes them almost reactionary—even “fundamentalist”—in nature.

Furthermore, (habituated) acceptance of established—though in some cases outmoded—paradigms, most notably the history of narrative cinema view discussed in Interchapter Two, leads to a kind of argumentation about the video game that applies diachronic considerations—the histories of other media—to the particular, synchronic, situation of games at the time. Across the board, thinkers—both “narratologists” and “ludologists”—seem to view the contemporary situation of video games as a stage in an already established narrative of development, one that either promises better things to

come or requires intervention. The terms of discussion, subsequently, do not always examine or apply to games as they were at the time or, in some cases, to games at all. The greatest *barrier to communication*, then, lies in the use of terms by both “sides.” On the one hand, some critics—especially the “narratologists”—make (apparently habitual) use of “established” terms, such *story* and *narrative*, that are left without specific or stipulative definitions. Other critics, usually the “ludologists,” offer specific (often narrow) definitions of similar terms and criticize the “narratologists” for not offering clear definitions. As I will show below, however, the issue is not just in the lack of explicit definitions of terms from all sides, but in largely incompatible terministic screens that engage—or don’t engage—with particular approaches to critical theory.

The result of the interaction of the four elements at this threshold of invisibility is that the main issues, namely games and the challenges they present to established discourses, are rarely considered *explicitly* in discussion. This, along with some of the extremism of the participants in the so-called debate, is one of the potential problems at these moments: the convergence of competing terministic screens can overshadow the main issues of discussion and obscure productive avenues of inquiry. This chapter will focus on using the threshold of invisibility concept, and its attendant elements, to examine the Narratology versus Ludology “debate” and locate the elements of their respective orientations that allowed this kind of confusion to arise. I will focus first on the competing narrativizations of each “side,” along with some complications in the respective argumentation. Then, I will consider the influence of other narratives—like the



competing histories of the cinema—and how those imported views seem to trigger confusion between synchronic and diachronic elements. The resultant focus on the possibilities of games, rather than the games themselves, opens up an opportunity for an in-depth examination of the terms deployed by each side and the subsequent barrier to communication. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of later sources that rejected the Manichean premise of the “debate” in order to examine the major issues surrounding games and narrative. Ultimately, I argue here that these kinds of debates—or non-debates—obscure important considerations in discussions of new technologies or media and, crucially, that the threshold of invisibility concept is useful in understanding these kinds of fractious “debates.”

### **Perspectives Privileging Continuity, Discontinuity, and Compromise**

Unlike discussions of digital photography, which had a fairly clear divide between viewpoints, the perspectives favoring continuity and discontinuity for video games are complicated somewhat by the inconsistency in the stated aims or goals of the various participants. There are, in fact, discursive and political dimensions to both perspectives. On the one hand, some scholars see games as a continuation of established discourses while others claim that new terms are needed. In addition, the *site* of video game study is in contention, with some scholars explicitly arguing for a new discipline and/or a new academic department, whereas others seem to implicitly favor including games in extant disciplines, like literary studies. Arguments for discontinuity are easier to track on the surface, as we’ll see below, but arguments for continuity are less politically explicit.

Arguments for continuity in this context generally involve applying older ideas to games or situating games within established critical structures. Janet Murray, for instance, who is usually (and, as we'll see below, somewhat unfairly) labeled a "narratologist" in the context of this discussion, is primarily interested in story and storytelling. For her, "it is always the story that comes first, because storytelling is a core human activity, one we take into every medium of expression, from the oral-formulaic to the digital multimedia" ("From Game-Story" 3). This kind of perspective situates games in an extant conversation—a consideration of storytelling as essential human activity—and leads Murray to claim that "[g]ames are always stories, even abstract games such as checkers or *Tetris*, which are about winning and losing, casting the player as the opponent-battling or environment-battling hero" ("From Game-Story" 2). While these particular claims were made in a later piece (the 2004 *First Person* edited collection, discussed below), Murray's 1997 book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, established her general perspective on digital storytelling (the subtitle alone indicates her focus), and contained, among other things, the infamous reading of *Tetris* discussed above. Overall, Murray is interested in the possibilities of storytelling in the digital realm, or what "new narrative traditions" it might generate (*Hamlet* 28). Interestingly, though, Murray does not explicitly argue that games should be included in Departments of English or Literature, or that work on games should be undertaken only by scholars in those fields. In fact, much of Murray's work seems to grow out of her own interests, as a scholar of literature and computer programmer. Some criticisms of Murray,

as I'll argue below, seem to miscast her in a number of ways. Regardless, the kind of continuity that Murray argues for here might be characterized more as the study of storytelling and the *potential* for storytelling in the new medium of games.

Other kinds of perspectives on continuity involve situating games in established structures, or, perhaps, in relating games to other modes to consider broader, transmedia questions. Henry Jenkins, for instance, argues that games might fit within several older traditions, or at the very least bear some similarities. For Jenkins,

[w]hen we refer to such influential early works as Shigeru Miyamoto's Super Mario Bros. as 'scroll games,' we situate them alongside a much older tradition of spatial storytelling: many Japanese scroll paintings map, for example, the passing of the seasons onto an unfolding space. ("Game Design" 122)

In this case, the important element—one that Jenkins feels is too often overlooked—is that of space, the (digital) realm in which the actions and interactions of a game take place. All games, Jenkins argues, fit within this general kind of framework that privileges space, and "[a]s such, games fit within a much older tradition of spatial stories, which have often taken the form of hero's odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives" ("Game Design" 122). Both abstract, platforming games—like Super Mario Bros.—and more overtly "story driven" games fit into this general framework, are part, as Jenkins claims, of a larger tradition. This fits with Jenkins' project, which calls for a focus on a "transmedia storytelling environment" to account for the complicated interactions between games, stories, and space ("Game Design" 121).

But it's also important to note that Jenkins is taking up a somewhat complex position. His goal, in fact, is to offer some compromise in the ongoing narrative versus

game feud, or “a middle-ground position between the ludologists and the narratologists, one that respects the particularity of this emerging medium—examining games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility” (“Game Design” 119). For Jenkins, as we’ve seen, this involves introducing a third term—*space*—to the discussion, which previously has been dominated by *narrative* and *game*. Jenkins locates games in established frameworks or contexts—spatial storytelling—but is careful not to elevate *narrative* or *story* above *game*. Instead, *space* becomes the focus, and an appropriate one since game designers focus on “design[ing] worlds and sculpt[ing] spaces” and privilege level design over “plotting or character motivation” (“Game Design” 121). Jenkins, then, complicates the continuity perspective by adjusting its terministic focus; if the simple version of the “debate” pits *story* against *game* as competitors for the guiding terms of discussion, and *story* implies continuity where *game* suggests discontinuity, then Jenkins’ use of *space* adds a third position that seems to maintain elements of continuity and discontinuity.

I would suggest, however, that Jenkins’ middle ground is perhaps more of an evocation of the messiness of the discussion than an actual compromise between extremes. Other such views entered the conversation from time to time. For instance, Celia Pearce argued that the hybridity of games and other interactive forms would challenge traditional ideas of authored, narrative content. For Pearce, writing in 2002, two kinds of “hybrid narrative/games,” massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) and simulation (or “God Games) like *The Sims*, could challenge the “broadcast media

narrative hegemony” of mass media by “reframe[ing] the producer/consumer relationship” (“Emergent” 21). The alteration of the relationship between producers and consumers echoes some of the discourse (and technoeuphoria) surrounding digital photography, where the difference between amateur and professional photographers is somewhat “eroded,” to borrow W.J.T. Mitchell’s term. The idea is perhaps given its most thorough (and well known) treatment in Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture* (2006); Jenkins claims that, in the new media environment, media producers and consumers, rather than “occupying separate roles,” might now be seen as “participants who interact with each other” in a sort of push-pull over entertainment experiences (2-3). All of these examinations of altered relationships, however, speak to a concern with power dynamics, or who tells the story and how. For Pearce, there are great potentials for what might be called authorship in the simulation games, which might function as generators of narratives: “*The Sims* is a sort of narrative Lego, a kind of domestic drama kit that allows the player to project his or her own experience on to the semi-autonomous characters she or he (sort of) controls” (“Emergent” 27). In this case, it is the player, not the programmer or producer, who helps to shape whatever narrative content the gameplay may have. *The Sims*, then, might function as a space, as Jenkins sees the idea, in which stories can unfold. In a way, the positions taken by Jenkins and Pearce can be read as a negotiation between *narrative* and *game*, but it is also a middle ground between arguments about authorship and the so-called hegemony of narratives (and perhaps, of authors). For Murray, as I’ll discuss below, the author—or the “cyberbard,” to use her

term—is still a very present, and welcome, figure, whereas Jenkins and Pearce, especially, seem to challenge the notion of centralized authorship. But other arguments seek to remove any concept of authorship or even of narrative from the discussion entirely.

The messiness—the blending of continuity and discontinuity in Jenkins and Pearce—should demonstrate that the story versus game dichotomy is inadequate to account for the complexity of the video game medium, but it is ultimately grouped with perspectives favoring continuity by adherents to the opposing perspective. Unfortunately, perspectives favoring pure discontinuity—centered in the ludologist camp—effectively call for a clean break with all other discourses, frameworks, or viewpoints, and thus view any other perspective—nuanced or not—as contrary.

But the idea of ludology, as coined by Gonzalo Frasca in 1999, was not necessarily agonistic. Frasca’s “Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences Between (Video)games and Narrative” sets out a number of goals for examining games. Frasca suggests ludology as a unifying principle, a means to bring game studies together into a single discipline much like he claims narratology has done for those who study narrative. Narratology, then, is a model for both study (moving away from “functionalism”) and a professional identity, and ludology will serve as a complement to narratology since, as Frasca argues, the latter cannot account for certain aspects of games. These aspects are tied primarily to the player’s role as active participant (as opposed to the passive observer who reads or watches games being played) and, interestingly, the

lack of well-rounded characters in computer games. Curiously, while Frasca's essay introduces the term "ludology" and is often referred to as an important text, it is seldom cited or engaged with elsewhere in the debate.

That might be due to a handful of issues in Frasca's argument and its generally accommodating view of the presence of narrative in games. Not unlike Jenkins, Frasca takes up something of a compromise position (though, unlike Jenkins, he does so before the fractious early exchanges of the narratology/ludology debate). Frasca argues that ludology, as he describes it, can be used "along with narratology to better understand videogames" ("Ludology"), suggesting that there is some use, and need, to consider both narrative and gameplay. But Frasca's use of narratology, and his view of its place in broader critical discourse, seem somewhat limited. Toward the middle of his text, Frasca uses Claude Bremond's schema, which continued the work of Vladimir Propp, for deducing possible plot points in a narrative ("Ludology"). This allows him, going forward, to point out the differences in a textual narrative and the complications introduced, in a game, by player action. But the use of Bremond—and Bremond alone—here is a precursor to the application (and criticisms) of narratology in the work of several ludologists. Frasca characterizes narratology as a term unifying the work of scholars from different disciplines, but only makes use of the single narratologist. This is a problem on two fronts. First, as H. Porter Abbot claims, narratology has grown "well beyond its origins in both scope and diversity of method," to the point that scholars now "increasingly prefer the more inclusive term 'narrative theory'" (238). But while the

scope of practice is wide, it is not necessarily its own discipline. As Ian Bogost, critiquing Frasca and the narratology/ludology debate, would argue years later, narratology “was never a term that unified scholars from different disciplines; indeed, narratology remains a very particular structuralist approach to the study of narrative—not story mind you, but the differences between stories and their telling” (“Videogames”). In contrast, Frasca proposes ludology as the name for the “yet non-existent ‘discipline that studies game and play activities’” (“Ludology”). In short, the move toward continuity in Frasca’s text, of keeping the practices and approaches of narratology as part of a larger set of critical approaches stands on somewhat shaky argumentative ground, leaving the move toward discontinuity, the creation of a new term and new discipline of ludology, as the more pointed, more forceful claim.

And this is consistent with much of the argumentation by ludologists more broadly, all of whom favor a view toward discontinuity, albeit with varying fervor. Though Frasca coined the term ludology, Espen Aarseth is arguably the critic at the center of the movement, and one even erroneously credited with coining the term (Jenkins, “Videogames as” 129).<sup>36</sup> Aarseth’s *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* is perhaps the prototypical ludological text; it’s cited by Frasca as an explicit influence, and the term “cybertext” gained some small currency in contemporary discussions, both with so-called “narratologists” like Murray and other ludologists, such as Markku Eskelinen, who co-founded a journal titled *Cybertext Yearbook* (2000-2007).

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<sup>36</sup> Curiously, Aarseth rarely, if ever, uses the term ludology in any of his work. This is evident from both my own reading and Frasca’s claims as of 2003 (“Ludologists” 94).



Aarseth offers a similar, seemingly conciliatory approach to Frasca's, but, ultimately, Aarseth's focus here and later is on creating a clear separation between critical tools used on codex texts and critical tools—many of which will need to be created—used on “cybertexts.” The call for “new terms” that Aarseth makes is the core of views on discontinuity in this discussion.

*Cybertext* does not deal exclusively with games, but does posit a particular perspective on literature that allows for consideration of literal mechanical elements as a part of the text and the reader's experience of it; Aarseth proposes the term “cybertext” to encompass this perspective, and wants to view texts with mechanical elements (such as hypertexts, computer games, and Multi-User Dungeons) as “textual machines” (*Cybertext* 21). These texts that incorporate a machine component, or, rather, texts that require literal manipulation (“non-trivial effort”) to traverse are termed “ergodic,” and “nonergodic” texts (such as the codex) require only trivial effort, such as eye movement and page turning (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 1). The main distinction between Aarseth's approach and the common approaches by literary criticism to ergodic texts lies in the difference between metaphorical and literal traversal. For literary theorists, traversal of the text's “world” is a purely metaphorical experience, whereas in ergodic texts the traversal is literal as, say, a computer game's “game world” can be moved through via input from the player (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 4).<sup>37</sup> This is the primary point of departure for Aarseth; literary critics attempt to apply critical theories designed for print text to ergodic texts without

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<sup>37</sup> It should be immediately apparent that the “worlds” in computer games are perhaps not as literal as Aarseth seems to claim.

reexamining the core concepts of those theories and recognizing the (mechanical) difference between the two forms. Aarseth condemns these attempts, with a particular emphasis on narrative approaches, as ideological, hoping to establish a perspective that remains free of the “civil wars” in literary studies (*Cybertext* 15). To do this, Aarseth proposes distinctive terms (i.e. cybertext, ergodic, etc.) with “unproblematic connotations” (*Cybertext* 59). Having such apparently neutral terms will allow for more productive approaches to digital forms than those afforded by critical approaches such as semiotics and narratology, both of which Aarseth criticizes as too limited to account for ergodic texts (*Cybertext* 40, 111). Aarseth’s text establishes some central terms for ludology as well as its ideological program, an attempt to break away from the ideology of the literary establishment and what Aarseth calls the “omnipresent influence of narrative” (*Cybertext* 182). This would be the position taken by most ludologists throughout the debate, a position conceived of as revolutionary and anti-imperialist (attempting to thwart colonization of game studies by other disciplines).

One notable, and oft-quoted passage, in *Cybertext* sticks out almost as an aside. Early in the text, Aarseth observes that “[t]o claim that there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories. And yet, as this study tries to show the difference is not clear-cut, and there is significant overlap between the two” (*Cybertext* 5). This acknowledgement of a relationship between games and narratives was something of a rarity, and did not always seem to be a part of Aarseth’s reasoning going forward.

The view toward discontinuity here as presented by Aarseth and others is an ideological one: there needs to be a clean break with established discourses, especially in literary studies, in order to avoid importing the ideological baggage of those established discourses. For Aarseth, that difficulty in discerning metaphorical labyrinths with literal, mechanical (albeit digital) ones is a key issue, and is a distinction brought up, in one form or another, by other ludologists. Markku Eskelinen, for instance, repeatedly (and somewhat acidly) claims that scholars writing about games cannot tell the difference between telling stories and playing catch (“The Gaming”; “Towards” 36). This “misunderstanding” seems to inform one vociferous and enduring claim for discontinuity that Eskelinen would pose: that other fields would attempt to “colonize” game studies. For Eskelinen, the newness of the study of games left it “very open to intrusions and colonisations from the already organized scholarly tribes” (“Towards” 36). Eskelinen’s work, and his collaborative work with Raine Kaskimaa co-editing *Cybertext Yearbook*, routinely takes up this particular stance. In the introduction to the first edition of *Cybertext Yearbook*, Eskelinen and Kaskimaa aim to take Aarseth’s cybertext theory as a point of departure for a new approach to textuality—the study of text as a medium rather than the study of texts (7-8). The emphasis here is not specifically on games, but on all kinds of cybertexts. Cybertext is judged as a preferable approach, as most approaches to electronic literature, and to hypertext in particular, are over-hyped and have, subsequently, undermined their own credibility—a situation that allows traditional literary institutions, “when they feel threatened enough,” to merely “assimilate hypertext

theory for their own purposes” (Eskelinen and Koskimaa 8-9). For Eskelinen and Koskimaa, cybertext theory has inherent qualities that “undermine and resist the colonising traditional theory formations,” in part because of a close affinity with other approaches that, nevertheless, does not compromise cybertext theory’s own “firm identity” (9). Cybertext theory, importantly, has established itself as opposed to the “most advanced forms of narrative theory” whereas approaches to hypertext, according to Eskelinen and Koskimaa, rely on “ridiculously outdated” approaches drawn from Aristotle, Vladimir Propp, and Victorian novels; though no specific sources are mentioned, it is not a stretch to identify Murray as one of the “supposedly competent literary scholars” that seem so uninformed (9-10).

These moves toward discontinuity, via cybertext or ludology, view established discourses—on literature, film, theater, and so on—as imperialistic outsiders to the supposedly pristine, virgin territory of games (and of the digital medium more generally). There are, of course, a number of issues with this line of thought and approach, but the thrust of this kind of argument seeks to reject the old in favor of something new. But this is not quite the “clean break” or the death of a medium claimed in discourses on digital photography, which foresaw the replacement of chemical photography by a digital successor. There is a feel to Eskelinen and Koskimaa’s approach that might hint at superseding or replacing literary studies, for instance, but the main thrust of both their argument and, ultimately, Aarseth’s, is toward a kind of autonomy or sovereignty—the “resistance” to colonization speaks to this tendency.

The goals of these moves, though, are rendered fairly explicit, especially in the first issue of *Game Studies* (2001). Aarseth, the editor-in-chief, titled his editorial for the first issue “Computer Game Studies, Year One” and argues for the establishment of game studies as its own academic discipline. Aarseth claims that games are, more often than not, “simulations,” not “static labyrinths like hypertexts or literary fictions. The simulation aspect is crucial: it is radically different alternative to narratives as a cognitive and communicative structure. Simulations are bottom up; they are complex systems based on logical rules.” Because games are alternatives to narrative and composed primarily of systems of rules, qualities that no other form seems to have, no current academic discipline is equipped to theorize and study games. Aarseth instead proposes a new discipline, drawing a connection to architecture, which, though it contains art history, cannot be reduced to it—game studies would then contain media studies, aesthetics, and other considerations. Again, the rhetoric of colonization shapes the major considerations of a perspective on discontinuity, as Aarseth’s planned approach is deployed in order to counter the “colonizing attempts” from other fields like cinema or literature.

The ludologist position, then, looks to discontinuity—and sometimes fierce arguments to that effect—to distance itself from established disciplines. But the goal, to establish a new discipline, keeps the ludologists within the general context of academic work. In a way, their arguments aim to stake out new, or perhaps cordoned off, territory within an extant institutional or political sphere. There’s plenty in that proposal that

works for continuity as well. For instance, Aarseth points out that any scholar in the new discipline will come “from *somewhere else*, from anthropology, sociology, narratology, semiotics, film studies, etc, and the political and ideological baggage we bring from our old field inevitably determines and motivates our approaches” (“Computer”). The faint imagery of immigrants arriving in a new land seems more than a little ironic here, given the charges of colonialism raised early in the same piece, but Aarseth’s stance—in his first *Game Studies* editorial, anyway—speaks to the possibilities of a new discipline *within* the academy, where games can *also* be studied by other departments (Media Studies, English, etc.). Aarseth does point out that games can’t be trusted solely to these other departments, but he closes on, literally, an invitation to anyway who wants to contribute to the new field.

Given the tenor of much of Aarseth’s later work and the continuing hostility of Eskelinen, this invitation seems almost out of place. Subsequent arguments made by those in the ludologist camp suggest that separatism—albeit within the academy—remained their primary goal. As such, the ludologists carried forward the arguments that rejected established disciplines, and in particular the consideration of narrative, as means to examine games, though the arguments became less conciliatory in tone. This is most evident in the pointed exchanges in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan’s edited collection *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (2004). The format of *First Person* simulates the kind of back-and-forth discussion that might be found at an academic conference: one or two other contributors offer responses to each

essay, the author of which is then allowed to respond in turn. This takes place both in the pages of the text and on the web (at [Electronicbookreview.com](http://Electronicbookreview.com)). The result is the clearest example in the so-called debate of an actual structured debate.

Aarseth's essay, "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation," is framed as a statement on the relevance (or irrelevance) of narratology in game studies (and particularly in game aesthetics). Aarseth (implicitly) expands the question to encompass not just the study of narrative, but the study of texts as well. Treating games as texts, for Aarseth, seems now to be the core of the problem: "Are games texts? The best reason I can think of why one would ask such a crude question is because one is a literary or semiotic theorist and wants to believe in the relevance of one's training" ("Genre" 47). The colonizing rhetoric of earlier texts is here given a further political dimension—textual scholars look to the popularity of games as a means to branch out into new territory that can add recognition (and presumably legitimacy) to their own pursuits ("Genre" 45). But, for Aarseth, games are not at all like texts; they are not intertextual (playing one won't help you play another), themes are irrelevant (chess pieces can be replaced by any objects with no effect on the game), and the kind of "play" that scholars often point to as analogous is merely metaphorical in texts while literal in games ("Genre" 48, 53). Along with the confusion of the textual question comes, in Aarseth's view, an unfortunate tendency to reform games to a level of (literary) quality, something he sees as a political move grounded in economic and (elitist) academic ideologies ("Genre" 48-49). Ultimately, Aarseth argues that "narrative" should not be the

dominant term for consideration of games, but instead “simulation should be adopted “as a major hermeneutic discourse mode” (“Genre” 53). It is simulation that is dominant in games, not narrative.

Stuart Moulthrop’s response to Aarseth highlights some key issues in the ludologist stance. Moulthrop, a hypertext author himself, identifies himself as a ludologist or at least as sharing the same alignment, but he suggests, via an extended metaphor involving grumbling soldiers, some dissension in the ranks (notably his). Moulthrop suggests that some of Aarseth’s more vigorous arguments against narrative, such as the interchangeability of objects as chess pieces, seem aimed to critique established theories without much self-criticism. This leads to an implicit rejection of cultural studies—a dangerous and isolationist stance. Aarseth responds by summarizing Moulthrop’s critique as an accusation of fundamentalism and then immediately embraces it, claiming that “fundamentalism has its uses. In academic discourse, a clear, uncompromising, radically different position can be invaluable simply by forcing the rest of the field to do more critical thinking” (“Eспен Aarseth Responds”) Here, the ludologist position is presented as intentionally intransigent for, it seems, political reasons, the success or failure of which is hinted at in Eskelinen’s essay and responses to others.

Eskelinen’s essay, “Towards Computer Game Studies,” takes up the by now familiar ludologist stance against academic imperialism that he claims—even more strongly in this essay—is born out of ignorance of theory. The problem, it seems, is that literary scholars don’t know narratology particularly well, but if they did the problems in



the narrativist approach would be obvious (“Towards” 36). Eskelinen then seeks to “‘exhaust’ classical narratology” by demonstrating that more robust definitions of narrative necessarily discount the presence of narrative in games (“Towards” 37). Using a definition of narrative derived from Gerald Prince and Gerard Genette, Eskelinen states that narrative requires both “a temporal sequence of events” and “a narrative situation (with both narrators and narratees for starters)” (“Towards” 37). Games may have the former, but the latter, the narrative situation is absent—but when it is present, it is “at the service of an ergodic dominant,” and apparently unimportant (“Towards” 37). Returning to Metz’s concept of narrative creating one time scheme in turns of another, Eskelinen again argues that games do not do this, but “[i]n cases where another time scheme is invented, it is not as important as the first one [the time of game play]” (“Towards”39). The effects of one player/reader on another is also discussed, and Eskelinen points out that one person’s reading of Dostoevsky would not influence another reader’s, as opposed to what happens in multi-player games (though, curiously, single player games do not enter into this analogy) (“Towards”38). Responses to the essay by J. Yellowlees Douglas and Richard Schechner are summarily dismissed, as Eskelinen accuses them of mere self-promotion and an unwillingness to define their concepts (thus, he won’t engage with them).

Julian Kücklich’s separate response and critique (available only online) suggests that studying “games as games” creates an unproductive tautology that isolates the study of games. Kücklich condemns the use of anti-imperialist rhetoric by ludologists who have

no more “native claim” to games studies than anyone else. As a result, the ludologists seek to close off the immigration of terms from other disciplines that has so benefited literary studies (which incorporates terms and concepts from sociology, psychology, and other areas). Eskelinen, in turn, finds no critique of his essay in Kucklich’s response, and, since Kucklich is unwilling to “debate in an academic matter,” no further response is warranted. Nevertheless, Eskelinen sets out to make his point as he would explain it “to a child,” arguing that importing critical theories without thought ignores the specific traits of games. Ultimately, however, Eskelinen claims some small victory, as the hardline stance of the ludologists has prevented scholars in game studies from being uncritical of their own approaches. Fundamentalism, it seems, does have its uses.

The charge leveled by Aarseth and Eskelinen in *First Person* seems to be that other scholars are attempting to colonize game studies with an uncritical importation of terms from other disciplines. But Kucklich’s critique of Eskelinen’s anti-imperialist rhetoric seems appropriate: it’s unclear what claim the ludologists have to “native” status. Eskelinen’s refusal to answer these critiques—or any others—on account of the “refusal” of his critics to “debate academically” obviously reinforces the intransigent “fundamentalist” stance, though it’s unclear what Eskelinen would view as legitimate academic debate, given his tendency to belittle and question the professionalism of his critics and other scholars. Viewed from that perspective, this fundamentalism may have its uses—though Eskelinen’s claim of success is probably dubious—but it has its limits, and those seem to be reached very quickly in the exchanges in *First Person*. This is

evident in Eskelinen's response to Jenkins' piece on spatial storytelling. Eskelinen claims that Jenkins does not define his terms and for seems to seek (and find, it seems) "stories everywhere" ("Markku Eskelinen's Response [to Jenkins']"). In one of the lengthiest responses in the entire collection, Jenkins responds to all of Eskelinen's criticisms, claiming that he (Jenkins) is not a narratologist and has never claimed to be (which is part of a larger issue that I will discuss below), and that Eskelinen, in order to establish a new academic discipline, is playing a zero-sum game. Jenkins describes Eskelinen's position as involving "an act of purification—strip away everything that doesn't look like a game and discuss these works purely from a ludological framework" and an assumption that Jenkins (and, presumably, other narratologists) is doing the same with a narrative framework ("Henry Jenkins Responds"). For Jenkins, this is part of "a particular kind of "game" - defining and defending the borders of an emerging academic discipline - and [Eskelinen] is doing so according to some traditional rules: define terms, lay down axioms, cite core theorists, and then engage in debate around those various abstractions" ("Henry Jenkins Responds").<sup>38</sup> But, ultimately, this is just a contest between opposing models, where one will win and one will lose, but Jenkins questions "whether it makes sense to think of knowledge production as a zero-sum game" ("Henry Jenkins Responds").

It's hard not to agree with Jenkins' sentiment here. But the issue, as we've seen, is not so much knowledge production as political maneuvering. Eskelinen, Aarseth, and the

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<sup>38</sup> Jenkins quips that this approach might be described as "my paradigm is bigger than your paradigm," or "my theorist can beat up your theorist" ("Henry Jenkins Responds").

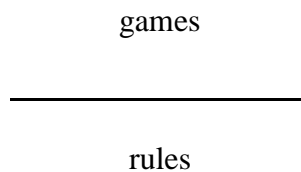
ludologists—by explicit admission—offer a particularly fundamentalist position in order to “defend the borders” of the new discipline.

### **Problems in the Argumentation of Both Perspectives**

In Chapter Two, I explored the structure of the arguments for discontinuity (post-photography) and continuity (photographic culture) by means of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s dissociation. To do the same work here, however, might not be as fruitful a first step in examining the underpinnings of the so-called “narratologist” and “ludologist” positions. As we’ve seen, these positions, to the extent that they are identifiable as clear positions, tend a bit towards the Manichean—games are stories (or stories always come first) versus games are, say, Aarseth’s sets of abstract rules (or, more often and more forcefully, “games are not stories”). As a result, dissociative pairs for the “narratologists” might claim story as a term II to define the term I of games:



Conversely, the ludologists might be deploying a dissociative pair that explains games (and cybertexts more broadly) via a different relationship, where, for instance, rules form a term II to the term I of games:



But the ludologists' fundamentalist rhetoric seems determined to isolate games from just about any other discourse, *in spite* of Frasca's formative view of ludology as complementary and Aarseth's acknowledgement of the relationship between games and texts in *Cybertext* and his call for game studies as an inclusive new discipline (perhaps not everyone was welcome after all). The narratologist position, to the extent that it exists as described (something I will discuss below) doesn't seem interested in purging games of anything but story so much as merely focusing on the story elements. And the "compromise" perspectives of Jenkins and Pearce seems to demonstrate that, at the very least, the relationships between the various terms—*story*, *game*, *space*—are more complex than either of the main perspectives of the debate seem to indicate. Even on the surface, games contemporary to the early stages of the debate, such as Roberta Williams' *King Quest* games (a series with seven entries by 1997), featured both puzzles and story elements (a plot, characters, etc.). The oft-cited puzzle-mystery game *Myst* featured puzzles, navigation of space, and something akin to a detective story (the player attempts to discover what has happened on a deserted fantasy island). In short, I would argue that the arguments in this debate were more reductive than dissociative—to say that games are *only* stories or *only* rules doesn't really seem to establish a new "reality" or actually address incompatibilities so much as erase or even ignore them.

But even more problematically, the main focus of the discussion, ostensibly, is games. But in the dissociative pairs that most accurately reflect the argumentation of each side, games are reduced to a term I; they are always—even when the argument is for

studying games *as* games—imagined or defined *in terms* of something else. By comparison, the arguments about digital photography always attempted to locate that new technology relative to existent photographic practices and technology. Even the post-photographic position, which called digital photography a new medium and drew a line between it and chemical photography, still attempted to theorize what that new medium would do, would be capable of, and so on. In a curious way, the narratology versus ludology debate seems to avoid this kind of theorization altogether—the narratologists are interested in stories, and ludologists are interested in what games are not. In short, neither “side” seems interested in examining games *as they are*. This, too, might be a reductive view, but it is one borne out by some thoughtful analysis of the debate that I will examine at the end of this chapter. Regardless, some of the issues in argumentation here go to illustrate one of the core problems at the center of this threshold of invisibility: in attempting to discuss a new medium, the participants in discussion end up focusing on factors other than the topic itself: games. This provides a curious twist to the argumentation in this debate: if the topic itself does not provide the material for discussion, what does?

### **Diachronic and Synchronic Confusion at the Core of the Debate**

The rest of this chapter addresses the other threshold of invisibility elements and their usefulness in examining the narratology versus ludology debate. In Chapter Two, the elements—narrativization and barrier to communication—provided an opportunity to locate and analyze the main parts of the terministic screens involved. In the narratology

versus ludology debate, as we've seen, the competing narrativizations do expose quite a lot of the underpinning ideas for both perspectives, but we've also seen that the arguments derived from those narrativizations don't quite speak to the breadth of the issue. The other threshold elements, then, will provide sites to examine the reasoning of each perspective and explore the makeup of their respective terministic screens.

This section will focus on the confusion of synchronic and diachronic elements. Critics from both "sides" of the debate often describe games as in a particular stage or step in some process of development, often in comparison to established media such as books and films. While comparisons of this kind seem reasonable, given the focus of much of the conversation (and, in general, of conversations on multi-media platforms like the computer), the ways in which they influence the argumentation seem to exceed the expected influence of such surface level comparisons. For instance, arguing that games are in the early stages of their development—reasonable since the medium is "young"—becomes a way for participants to argue about what games *should* or *will* be. In short, the state of video games at the moment of the debate—the synchronic state—is deployed as an argument for what their development will be—a diachronic quality. In this case, the influence of external narratives and paradigms—such as the view of film history discussed in Interchapter Two—are employed to draw a connection between these synchronic and diachronic elements: film developed a certain way, therefore games will as well. This kind of argument is at least hinted at in a number of sources from across the debate. This section examines the influence of such thinking on the positions taken by

participants in the debate and the contributions of that thinking to their respective terministic screens. Since the narratologist position is harder to define (something I will discuss below) I will start with—and focus my analysis on—the most notable entry in the discussion from that side, or rather the work of the critic most identified as a narratologist, Janet Murray and her text *Hamlet on the Holodeck*.

Murray's book is largely focused on the potential of digital environments, and she uses, as a sort of guiding metaphor, the fictional technology of the "Holodeck" from the science fiction television show *Star Trek*. The Holodeck is a fully interactive, holographic simulator that creates environments, characters, and situations for the show's characters to interact with during their leisure time. Needless to say, the technology for such a device does not currently exist, nor is it likely to exist in the near future. Still, it is a captivating idea, and one that remains at the center of much of Murray's thinking. Murray positions all digital media in a larger group of narrative media, and thus draws comparisons between different members of this group—novels, films, and games. But the comparisons are tempered by certain qualifications that Murray makes based on the apparent similarity between the processes of development of the various media.

Murray's primary focus in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* is the great potential of digital media for storytelling, and much of her commentary situates the digital in comparison with the analogue. For Murray, the "wide range of narrative art" possible in the digital realm "holds the promise of a new medium of expression that is as varied as the printed book or the moving picture" (*Hamlet* 28). Responding in part to perspectives that restrict



digital media to a “low” form (something she rejects throughout her text), Murray cautions that “it would be a mistake to compare the first fruits of a new medium too directly with the accustomed yield of older media” (*Hamlet* 28). While this stance seems quite reasonable, the key phrase here is “first fruits.” Murray’s defense of computer generated, digital forms does not rely on an argument against a hierarchy of value in media so much as it takes issue with evaluating forms that are not as “far along” in their development: “We cannot use the English theater of the Renaissance or the novel of the nineteenth century or even the average Hollywood film or television drama of the 1990s as the standard by which to judge work in a medium that is going through such rapid technical change” (*Hamlet* 28). Murray’s reasoning here—and throughout *Hamlet on the Holodeck*—holds that digital media, games included, have not yet produced their masterpieces, and are therefore more promissory than actualized.

At the core of this viewpoint, of course, is the idea that different media and forms reach a particular artistic maturity and produce masterworks, but more specific to Murray’s views on the promise of the digital is her reliance on a particular view of how media develop to the point of their maturity. To illustrate this idea, Murray begins with the medium most familiar to her area of expertise: the book. Murray observes that the invention of the printing press was not the invention of the book; indeed, early books “are called incunabula; the word is derived from the Latin for swaddling clothes and is used to indicate that these books are the work of a technology still in its infancy” (*Hamlet* 28).

Books as we know them today were developed over the period of several decades.

Murray observes that

it took fifty years of experimentation and more to establish such conventions as legible typefaces and proof sheet corrections; page numbering and paragraphing; and title pages, prefaces, and chapter divisions, which together made the published book a coherent means of communication. (*Hamlet* 28)

The pre-book incunabula is, for Murray, the valid form for comparison with contemporary digital environments and games, which are, furthermore, commensurate with the experimentation and codification that led to the book: “the garish videogames and tangled Web sites of the current digital environment are part of a similar period of technical evolution, part of a similar struggle for the conventions of coherent communication” (28). Prominent here are some assumptions similar to those investigated in Interchapter Two: 1) a form or medium in its “infancy” undergoes a process of maturation and development, and 2) that development proceeds toward a particular goal or end, often ascribed after it is reached. These are the kinds of assumptions underpinning the—now largely defunct—paradigm of early cinema history as a process of development toward the narrative film. In deploying these ideas in this context, however, Murray seems to claim that contemporary digital media are “harbingers of the holodeck.”

This familiar idea is underscored by Murray’s inclusion of early cinema history as a further model for media development—this is the explicit evocation of that paradigm in Murray’s work. But she also creates a key distinction between a technology and its artistic potential. Murray points to the Lumiere exhibition at the Paris Café in 1895 as a seminal moment in film history, observing that many people accept this moment as the

birth of the cinema. Murray, however, specifies that the Paris Café moment was the first exhibition of the camera technology, not the cinema. The invention of the camera is equated to the invention of the printing press, the cinema to the book, and the process of development for each is similar:

As in the case of the printing press, the invention of the camera led to a period of incunabula, of ‘cradle films.’ In the first three decades of the twentieth century, filmmakers collectively invented the medium by inventing all the major elements of filmic storytelling, including the close-up, the chase scene, and the standard feature length. The key to this development was seizing on the unique physical properties of film: the way the camera could be moved; the way the lens could open, close, and change focus; the way the celluloid processed light; the way the strips of film could be cut up and re-assembled. By aggressively exploring and exploiting these physical properties, filmmakers changed a mere recording technology into an expressive medium. (Murray, *Hamlet* 66)

The camera technology is “merely” for recording, just as the printing press is presumably “merely” to print text. Furthermore, this view once again takes the view of early cinema as a process of development toward the essentially narrative. As with the view of Griffith as pioneer or inventor, here film techniques—specifically manipulation of the physical components—generally considered as staples of Classical Hollywood storytelling are likewise discovered through experimentation. The ultimate outcome, the invention of the “expressive medium,” may not explicitly speak to the narrative determinism that Murray seems to be subscribing to, but she ultimately equates the expressiveness of the medium to the ability to tell stories. The advent of sound cinema, another turning point in cinema history, ironically allows Murray to illustrate the particular paradigm to which she adheres: “After thirty years of energetic invention, films captured the world with such persuasive power and told such coherent and compelling stories that some critics

passionately opposed the addition of sound and color as superfluous distractions” (*Hamlet* 66). Cinema is not cinema, then, until it is technically capable of capturing the world and telling “coherent and compelling stories;” and the technical qualities—formatting—also come to the fore in the history of the book—it is, after all, “legible typefaces and proof sheet corrections; page numbering and paragraphing; and title pages, prefaces, and chapter divisions” that make the book into an “effective medium of communication” rather than a mere technology of reproduction (*Hamlet* 28). Thus, Murray borrows from Jacobs, Ramsaye, and others who saw *editing* as the quality that made cinema expressive.

And this gets at the core concept behind Murray’s book: media technologies go through a period of experimentation and development that culminates in expressive capability, and specifically the capability to convey compelling stories. Digital environments are, for Murray, in the early, transitional stage before they reach their expressive zenith (her evocation of the Holodeck concept). The distinction between phases—mere technology and artistic form—is quite evident when Murray questions the common legends surrounding the Paris Café exhibition. The view of the Lumiere exhibition as the founding moment, according to Murray, is “satisfying to us now because it falsely conflates the arrival of the representational technology with the arrival of the artistic medium, as if the manufacture of the camera alone gave us the movies” (*Hamlet* 65-66). At this point, dissociation becomes useful in examining Murray’s claims. Murray processes the cinema and its technologies through a dissociative pair that allows

for the outcome of experimentation, the “artistic medium,” to be a term II that renders the “representational technology” of the motion picture camera into a valid expressive form:

representational technology

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artistic medium

The techniques of the artistic medium—discovered by experimentation and pioneering—in the cases of both the book and the cinema allow their respective technologies to achieve an apparent expressive goal. In Murray’s case, however, it’s important to note that this expressive goal is always, first and foremost, the ability to tell coherent and compelling stories. This is the case both for books and films and, eventually, for digital environments as well. As a result, narrative (loosely defined) functions as the ultimate guideline for development of a medium. As a dissociative pair, narrative (term II) thus shapes and guides a medium (term I) to its ultimate artistic zenith:

medium

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narrative

This relationship holds for the book, for film, and finally for the future of digital environments. This is in keeping with the premise of Murray’s largely speculative conclusions—the subtitle of the book is *The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*—regarding the potential of future storytellers, or “cyberbards” and “cyberdramatists” (*Hamlet* 284, 276). The two components of her title, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, neatly sum

up the stance that Murray takes in her consideration of digital environments; she looks for artistic masterworks (*Hamlet* and, presumably, other canonical works) in a fully developed, artistically expressive digital realm—a technological situation that, like the Holodeck, does not yet exist.

These two core assumptions—the existence and importance of artistic masterworks and the process of development that media go through in order to produce them—create a number of problems for the study of current digital technology. The primary contention of the ludology versus narratology debate seemed to be just what video games “are,” or, oftentimes, what they “should” be. Hanging over these questions, of course, is the obverse problem: what video games “are not.” For Murray, “games are always stories,” and, for that matter, “it is always the story that comes first” (“From Game-Story” 2, 3). But regardless of whether or not this is a valid point—and it was a point of serious contention in the debate—we have observed that Murray seems to base her reasoning on problematic and pre-paradigm shift thinking about other media, and this underscores the kind of problem of comparison that she attempted to avoid: rather than compare contemporary games to novelistic or cinematic masterworks—a practice she explicitly condemns—Murray ends up discussing digital masterworks in terms of their potential. In short, Murray spends considerable time comparing great novels and films to a digital form that does not yet exist: though she begins at the contemporary moment—the (synchronic) state of games—the evidence for her speculative arguments is drawn from the diachronic development of other media.

This is the case even for scholars who reject the centrality of narrative in the study of video games. Indeed, the primary objection of many of the self-titled ludologists to current thinking on games is rooted in dissatisfaction with the methods, such as Murray's, used to theorize games and other digital media. That said, many of them fall into the same line of thought that extracts or proposes some sort of diachronic potential from the contemporary (synchronic) reality. Eskelinen, one of Murray's most bitter (or rude) critics, also compares the contemporary state of video games to the early days of cinema. In discussing what he calls the "gaming situation," Eskelinen suggests that "this is a bit like the 1910s in film studies; there were attractions, practices and very little understanding of what was actually going on, not to mention lots of money to be made and lost" ("The Gaming"). Unlike Murray, however, Eskelinen seems to identify early cinema primarily in terms of Gunning's attractions, indicating a preference for post-paradigm shift thinking. However, this line of conversation, culminating in economic terms, is not uncommon in much of the criticism of the time (the early 2000s). The profitability of games is used as both an argument for their relevance and as an illustration of the problems with the industry—problems that some critics feel that game theorists are in a position to address or even solve, an issue I will discuss below.

And while Eskelinen and the ludologists don't share Murray's commitment to narrative, they nevertheless employ the same kind of promissory rhetoric. The potential of digital media, and particularly what Aarseth calls "cybertext," is the primary goal of the ludologist project. For Eskelinen, cybertexts can resist ideologically driven meaning

making, and transcend and challenge established theoretical frames like narratology (“(Introduction to)” 61-62). In opposition to Murray, Eskelinen sees in digital texts a potential challenge to ideological (and disciplinary) hegemony. But this value, as Eskelinen and Koskimaa see it, can only come about as a result of further study,

by the further development of new media communication ... [Cybertext theory is] not the key to everything, nothing is, but it is very efficient in filtering out intellectual noise and waste. It allows us to make elementary sense of the medium and start talking across traditions, practices, conventions and technologies. (11)

In this sense, the apex of digital media is as a critical, rather than artistic or narrative, medium.

Even critics not directly engaging in the narratology or ludology debate either hold some promissory view or at least begin from the premise that games are developing into something worth noting. Pearce, for instance, begins her *First Person* essay by identifying the crucial moment when new media or forms become acceptable:

“Literature, film, even popular music all began to a certain extent as ‘folk’ genres that, once their cultural relevance had been proven lasting, caught the attention of theorists and entered into academic discourse” (Pearce, “Towards” 143). While most of Pearce’s essay does involve examining games as games, the starting point is almost the standard for contemporary writing. For instance, Frasca—the scholar who first proposed the use of the term ludology—sees serious potential for games to have real-world, socio-political influence. But, Frasca sees the current state of games much like Murray does, as an underdeveloped, immature form. Despite the popularity of games, it seems that they are “still far away from becoming a mature communication form that could deal with such



things as human relationships, or political and social issues” (Frasca, “Videogames” 85). But for Frasca, the potential is there for games to develop into a thoughtful medium, such that they “could indeed deal with human relationships and social issues, while encouraging critical thinking” (“Videogames” 85). Frasca sees games as having the potential to be a socially interventionist medium, taking on a role similar to Paulo Friere’s pedagogical work that led to current theories of critical pedagogy. Frasca’s ideas are in line with more recent game scholarship focused on “serious games,” or games that engage with or enact socially, ethically, or politically conscious issues.

Even in the “aftermath” of the ludology versus narratology debate, some of the promissory thinking on games persists. Ian Bogost, a game scholar who rose to prominence primarily after the debate, has, like Frasca, devoted considerable time and writing to the idea of serious games. But Bogost’s earlier work (2006) voices some frustrations at the contemporary situation of the gaming industry, in particular its fondness for first-person shooting games. However, these views are tempered by his analysis of what lies at the core of video games and game programming: the game engine. For Bogost,

the first-person shooter (FPS) has played a fundamental role in founding the industry of game engines, assemblages of common software components and tools used to make other games. While some may question the cultural value of games like Doom, this genre ushers in a new mode of cultural production, of which the FPS will prove to be but a prehistoric artifact. (*Unit 55*)

Here, games of questionable value are rehabilitated, not necessarily for their own merits, but for what the game code promises for the future—presumably, better, more culturally refined games. Not unlike Murray’s hierarchy of artistic medium above representational

technology, Bogost seems to imply that the creation of the game engine refines or progresses the medium, removing or antiquating the less desirable works. This might form a dissociative pairing where the game engine corrects undesirable games like first person shooters:

first person shooters (violent games)

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game engine

The game engine, then, is a template for better, or even more artistic material, and makes up the true value of the current generation of games.<sup>39</sup> But again, the focus seems to be promissory. The qualities that game engines promote will allow for something better down the road; a synchronic quality is used to describe what is assumed to be part of a diachronic process. More problematic here is the potential for only a selective analysis of the current state of games—a focus on only the generative power of the engine at the expense of the games it powers. In fairness, Bogost does not seem to restrict his analysis in this way, but it is clear in much contemporary game criticism that parts too often stand in for the whole—an emphasis on rules or narrative rather than all aspects of the games being studied.

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<sup>39</sup> As the first person shooter seems as lucrative and popular as ever, Bogost's prediction has, as of this writing, yet to come to pass. In his later work, Bogost seems more frustrated with the market trends of the game industry. This is perhaps most obvious in his response to an argument that casual games on social media sites such as Facebook allowed players to express creativity in interesting ways. The title of Bogost's rebuttal was "Shit Crayons."

What this reliance—from Murray to Bogost—on some assumed future for games seems to indicate is that the current moment is not the primary focus of discussion. I’ve suggested that this is an instance of synchronic and diachronic elements become confused, or, in this case, of critics using diachronic elements—the historical development of other media—as evidence for claims about the possible future of games, thus ignoring a synchronic element, the current state of games. This is part of a larger issue in scholarship on the digital: a focus on exaggerations, unintentional or otherwise, of the technologies rather than their current state—excitement over potential rather than reality. Marie-Laure Ryan labels this kind of thinking as an adherence to “narrative myths” (“Beyond Myth”). For Ryan, use of narrative myths, such as the Holodeck, by media theorists constitutes a means of “advertising” more than theorizing. Narrative myths “present an idealized representation of the genre they describe, [and] serve the useful purpose of energizing the imagination of the public, but they may also stand for impossible or ill-conceived goals that raise false expectations” (Ryan, “Beyond Myth”). In Ryan’s estimation, myths like the Holodeck or the Aleph (in this context, the “infinite” possibilities of hypertext fiction) contribute to a misconception of digital media in their current form.<sup>40</sup> The problem, then, is that theorizing *in terms* of narrative myths, or using “narrative concepts to advertise present and future product” detracts from productive

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<sup>40</sup> Needless to say, Ryan is critical of Murray’s use of the Holodeck metaphor, as she labels Murray a “proponent” of the Holodeck ideal. While I do agree with Ryan’s core argument, I’m not entirely sure I would go so far as to call Murray a “proponent.” The evocation of the Holodeck, while problematic, seems more wistful than devoted. This remained an issue throughout the ludology/narratology debate: critics took Murray’s speculative notions in *Hamlet* to be more serious and directed—more rigorous—than they actually are, all while questioning her rigor as a scholar.

theorization of the new forms. Ryan presents her own taxonomy for consideration of digital environments, basing it on particular aspects of interactivity—the player/reader is either interior or exterior to the space, and either explores it or directs its development (“Beyond Myth”). Regardless, Ryan’s critique underscores a problem that is raised again and again in these early discussions of video games: serious discomfort on the part of scholars regarding the present situation (in games, in scholarship, etc.).

But this discomfort also extends to the direction of the video game industry, and part of the hope of some critics is, perhaps, to have some influence on that direction. In his editorial in the second issue of *Game Studies*, Aarseth reflects on the first “year” of game studies as a discipline and on its relationship with the game industry. Aarseth concludes this reflection by wondering about the game industry’s “obsession with narratives,” concluding that this is likely a desire to increase profits: “if games can be more like novels (play through once, buy another),” the industry probably believes, then “people will buy more games” (“The Dungeon”). Aarseth wonders if academics should help the industry change, and what ramifications that might have for the ethics of game research. Later, he would conclude a little more forcefully. In “Game Studies, What is it Good For?”, Aarseth goes so far as to suggest that the “critical branch” of games (academics) should develop a relationship with the “creative branch” (the game industry). To do otherwise would be a “wasted opportunity” (Aarseth, “Game Studies” 6). Aarseth sees the negative example of film studies’ (lack of) relationship with the film industry as a “non-speaking non-relationship,” whereas, interestingly, other fields like Theatre

studies and literary studies have “a rich tradition of communication, cooperation, training, influence, and mutual benefit between academy and industry, the critical and the creative” (“Game Studies” 7). Aarseth, along with critics interested in serious games, like Frasca and Bogost, see some potential for academics to influence games and gaming, and this, in part, seems to inform the interest that Aarseth and others have in claiming autonomy (within the academy) for game studies.

This future cooperation—and the potential positive influence of academics—would, for Aarseth and others, mean moving games away from the “obsession” with narrative, whereas for Murray, the bright future clearly has games tied to narrative over the long term. The element of synchronic/diachronic confusion exposes more of the underlying reasoning and motives for these opposing views. But the forward looking bent is common to both perspectives, though they differ on what outcome they seek. This difference, that narrative is either the potential savior of games or their potential downfall, returns once again to the key differences in positions: games are narrative or games are not narrative (or should be something else). The primary *barrier to communication* at this threshold of invisibility, then, is found in this difference.

### **Barrier to Communication in Terms**

While the difference between *narrative* and *games* is, from the outset, the primary point of contention in the narratology versus ludology debate, the simple division does not, despite initial appearances, account for the wrangling and confusion of the debate as it occurred. As we’ve seen, the reasoning and motives underlying the two sides are more

varied, and include, among other things, commitments to or rejection of established discourses and political goals, both within the academy and in the games industry. But the core of the communicative difficulty lies in the apparently simple, surface difference in terms. A common critique of the so-called narratologists is that they do not define their terms. Eskelinen levels this accusation pretty frequently, even when, as is the case with Jenkins, definitions are offered. This is probably part of the fundamentalist strategy discussed above, but while these accusations are sometimes exaggerated, one core issue at this threshold of invisibility is the varied and divergent use of particular terms—especially *narrative*. How this term is used varies from undefined to selectively defined, and perhaps overly so. This becomes such an issue that one “side” of the argument, the “narratologists,” are not, in fact, narratologists at all. Use of terms, therefore, results in the primary *barrier to communication* at this threshold. This section will examine the use of terms by both sides. This will involve both a look at explicit definitions offered in texts and, in the case of Murray, an extended examination of associational clusters to get a sense for her often unstated definitions.

Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, the primary source for her thinking on the topic and the work that most ludologists seem to react to, might be characterized most fairly as a speculative exploration of the literary potential of digital media, especially the production of literary texts in conjunction with computers, a description borne out by her own stated goals. The text is mostly an introductory overview to a range of digital communication media and their potential for “storytelling.” Since Murray’s text is

informally grouped with the “narratologists,” the centrality of *narrative* as a key term is an understandable expectation. The book’s subtitle, “The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace,” confirms this while also seeming to present *narrative* as the primary term for exploration. This is largely the case, of course, as would be expected of a text associated with the narratological perspective, but it would be more accurate to say that *narrative* is one of several terms the Murray deploys to describe the materials explored by literary criticism—*story*, *drama*, *tradition*, *literary* and—perhaps most importantly—*author* and *meaning* all take prominent roles in the text as well. Murray’s view of literary study—and subsequently of approaches to “cyberspace” or digital media in general—is broadly encapsulated in these terms. But almost immediately it becomes clear that *Hamlet on the Holodeck* is not an extensive theorization of narrative in new media. Murray claims her goal is “to imagine what kinds of pleasures such a cyberliterature [literature in digital environments] will bring us and what sorts of stories it might tell” (*Hamlet* 10). Rather than an in-depth narratological analysis of new media, Murray sets about an exploration of what might be called the literary potential of the new technology, and in so doing her key terms—*narrative*, *story*, and *storytelling*—are deployed at times in conjunction and even as interchangeable descriptions of the literary qualities in which Murray is most interested. Ultimately, Murray’s text has the appearance of an investigation of narrative in digital environments, but *narrative*, *story* and *drama* are not, themselves, interrogated so much as taken as given. Some of this is due, no doubt, to the meta-narrative of narrative that Murray (implicitly) establishes and gestures to throughout

the text, but it's worth pursuing the clusters of terms present—specifically *narrative*, *story*, and *drama* (author and meaning will be discussed below)—in the text, as they seem to form the primary basis for critique within the larger context of the debate.

*Narrative* and *story* (in conjunction with *storytelling* and *storytellers*) are the terms that mostly commonly appear in Murray's generalizations about literature. But the terms are not clearly defined and rarely even differentiated from one another. Murray's primary model of narrative, what she calls the "multiform story," is defined as "written or dramatic narrative that presents a single situation or plot line in multiple versions, versions that would be mutually exclusive in our ordinary experience" (*Hamlet* 30). Murray uses this term specifically to differentiate between the kinds of narratives in digital media and (presumably) more traditional narratives, but multiform stories—including examples in twentieth century novels, films, and plays—are also "linear narratives straining against the boundary of predigital media like a two-dimensional picture trying to burst out of its frame" (*Hamlet* 29). In both cases, narratives are defined as stories, much in contrast with the considerable lengths to which many narratologists go to differentiate the two terms, something I will discuss below. Regardless of the fine distinctions, *story* and *narrative* often appear together and in these kinds of mutually denotative relations.

More crucially, *narrative* is not strictly defined (as, say, a sequence of events), and more often than not, that leaves *story* as the term that does the most work, especially in the context of *storytelling*. Murray rarely, if ever, discusses narrative as a noun—as in,



this text contains *a* narrative—nor does she attempt to designate texts *as* narratives. *Narrative*, in fact, is often reduced to an adjective to describe a noun (often a medium, form, or category) as a place where story can be found. Most cases of the term’s use appear in this way, with references to a number of loosely equated concepts that contain some quality of narrative. For example, “narrative expression” (*Hamlet* 10); “narrative entertainment” and “narrative art” (28); and “narrative literature” (129) are all used to refer to examples or categories of storytelling, either in digital environments or on the printed page. But *narrative*, as adjective, also refers to the primacy of story in general, in the form of “narrative experience” (132); “narrative beauty” (273); “narrative traditions” and “narrative formulas” (278); and, as an all-encompassing quality of life, “narrative imagination” (284). Of these, the traditions and formulas are particularly important ideas for Murray’s arguments regarding the development of new storytelling forms, part of the meta-narrative discussed below, but “narrative experience” is discussed in context of the adventure computer game, specifically in navigating a maze. Crucially, navigating a maze (in this case, without the pressure of a win-lose scenario) is both a narrative experience and “has the feeling of enacting a meaningful experience both consciously chosen and surprising” (*Hamlet* 132). For Murray, *meaning* is at the core of what constitutes *literature*, and both meaningful experience and narrative experience, tied together as they are in her reasoning, can be reasonably replaced with, say, *literary* experience. All told, *narrative* as adjective describes the kind of entertainment, art, experiences, traditions, and formulas that produce some form of meaning for the reader, a

meaning that results, to bring yet another somewhat vague term into the conversation, in *dramatic* satisfaction

While Murray's text does not focus specifically on the theatrical as its guiding metaphor, "dramatic engagement" or the opportunities within narratives for "dramatic moments" are referenced at a number of points in the text (*Hamlet* 80, 139). But like *story* and *narrative*, *drama* remains a fairly vague category, sometimes specifying stage theatre in general but often enough describing the content of a narrative form or, more poignantly, the quality of the reader/player/user's interaction with the "cyberdrama" in question. For instance, the spatial component of a digital environment (one of her four essential properties of digital environments, the others being "procedural," "participatory," and "encyclopedic") provides an opportunity for "dramatic enactment" of a plot (Murray, *Hamlet* 83). This kind of enactment relates to narrative experience, which, for Murray, loosely equates to a meaningful experience, one that seems to generate some kind of response. One approach that generates this kind of response is, of course suspense:

Computer gamers often experience shivers of physical fear as they approached an unopened door in a text-based or graphics-based labyrinth. The drama of suspenseful approaches does not have to be tied to combat or to its jack-in-the-box effects. It can also have the feeling of a determination to face the truth, to stare directly at the threatening beast. (*Hamlet* 135)

Here, the player of a computer game may have a meaningful experience of "facing the truth" rather than shooting it with a digital gun (though the latter also generates the kind of experience that Murray describes).

Meaningful experience seems to derive primarily from a sense of satisfaction or closure. For Murray, closure appears to refer primarily to adequate or satisfying conclusions to dramatic situations.<sup>41</sup> Puzzle games provide closure in completion, especially when they demand a certain kind of engagement from the player. For Murray, “the most dramatically satisfying puzzles are those that encourage the interactor to apply real-world thinking to the virtual world” (*Hamlet* 139). But satisfaction in electronic environments can be more complicated. Unlike print texts, some electronic texts (especially hypertexts) “refuse” closure by being challenging structurally rather than thematically. Closure comes from assembly by the reader, not plot resolution:<sup>42</sup>

In other words, electronic closure occurs when a work’s structure, though not its plot, is understood. This closure involves a cognitive activity at one remove from the usual pleasures of hearing a story. The story itself has not resolved. It is not judged as consistent or satisfying. Instead, the map of the story inside the head of the reader has become clear. Such a map does not necessarily feel inevitable or appropriate, the way the solution to a puzzle does. It may not be beautiful or shapely in any way. There is no emotional release or perception of fittingness, just a sense of going from the known to the unknown. This is very different from and far less pleasurable than our more traditional expectations of closure, as arising from the plot of the story and marking the endpoint of an action. (*Hamlet* 174)

The importance of *closure* is not as central to Murray’s text as it is sometimes made out, but grouped with *satisfaction*, it forms a smaller cluster of meaning underneath *drama*.

What also becomes clear, in keeping with the narrative of development that *is* central to Murray’s text, electronic environments are not (yet) capable of producing the kind of

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<sup>41</sup> Murray’s use of closure here, due to its similarity to catharsis, is the likely source of later accusations of her Aristotelianism.

<sup>42</sup> A hint at an idea central to Aarseth’s *Cybertext*.

dramatic, satisfying engagement that literature provides. And this apparent disparity might fuel some of the more problematic speculation which Murray engages in with regards to games.

Murray looks at a number of different digital forms throughout the text, including the very popular MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon/Domain), but the most cited, and infamous, sections of Murray's text includes her interpretation *Tetris* quoted at the beginning of this chapter. *Tetris* is primarily abstract, as the shapes that descend from the top of the screen do not seem to represent anything, but Murray's reading springs, I think, from her approach to the digital in general. If meaningful experience is at the core of what readers (and, now, players) desire, then even abstract elements and puzzles can be invested with "dramatic content." More so, they must have some story or narrative element, as these are terms closely associated with drama. Murray, indeed, draws a direct connection between game and story, claiming that "a game is a kind of abstract storytelling that resembles the world of common experience but compresses it in order to heighten interest. Every game, electronic or otherwise, can be experienced as a symbolic drama" (*Hamlet* 142). Even in this larger discussion of Murray's text, I hesitate to quote this particular line too out of context. Later in the debate, statements like this were interpreted to mean that the "narratologists" in the debate viewed all games as *merely* subsets of stories. Murray refuted this claim directly, but what appears evident from *Hamlet on the Holodeck* is an equation of the kinds of experience that both readers and players have. Meaningful experience is a key element of reading literature on the page

and on the screen, and for Murray, meaningful experience is derived from storytelling. *Narrative* is definitely a God-term for this kind of thinking, but it is not the same term used by narratologists and, subsequently, ludologists. The lure of digital environments, for Murray, is the potential to provide meaningful experiences as powerful as the ones she derives from the Victorian novel (her primary scholarly focus).

A summary of relations of Murray's terms—what goes with what and how—then, might go something like this: *stories* are present in a variety of forms and media, which adopt the quality of *narrative* (as adjective), the reading or experiencing of which, subsequently, can be labeled as *dramatic*, both in terms of the content (what happens in the *story* is *dramatic*) and the interaction of the reader (who experiences *drama* in the reading). Readers, craving *drama* (or catharsis, perhaps), seek out *narrative* forms that deliver *stories* and their *dramatic experiences*. Loosely speaking, this is what constitutes *literature* for Murray, both in print and in digital environments. I will not claim that this characterization is perfect, but the way Murray deploys these terms—and how they subsequently form associational clusters—seems to support this reading, in part because Murray does not offer stipulative or substantive definitions. The definition of terms is a frequent point of contention in the debate (Murray, in fact, receives ample criticism in this regard), and I think these particular examples are instructive; Murray's use of these terms places her, almost by default, in the narratologist "camp," but she does not use these terms as a narratologist would, nor is she particularly interested in theorizing *narrative* as much as exploring how (my formulation of her view of) literature functions

in the digital realm. *Hamlet on the Holodeck* is not a narratological text; Murray does not discuss or advocate any formal version of narrative theory or even bring into discussion any narrative theorist, aside from mentions of Vladimir Propp's "'morphology of the folk tale'" and quest narratives (*Hamlet* 195). This is not necessarily a criticism of Murray on my part—though she would later come under scrutiny by ludologists for relying on Propp and Aristotle<sup>43</sup> rather than some less "outmoded source" (Eskelinen, "(Introduction to) Cybertext Narratology" 54). Rather, the characterization of Murray's text as a speculative exploration is enormously important for further examination of the workings of the debate.

Murray is primarily interested in *story*, and, as I've pointed out above, her use of *narrative* is more as an adjective, one denoting that something contains a *story*. But in narratological terms, *narrative* and *story* are not synonymous in quite the same way. There is far too much rich material in narrative theory on these issues to represent here, but a quick overview will be useful. Traditionally, narratology (at the very least) differentiates between the *story*, an event or sequence of events, and how that story is told, or the *narrative discourse*; these are the terms aggregated by H. Porter Abbott to summarize the view of the field (15). Some narratologists even add another dimension; Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, for instance, differentiates between *story*—"the narrated

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<sup>43</sup> Murray's use of Aristotle is, at best, implicit, as he is mentioned explicitly only twice in the text and both times in passing. The discussion of theater and closure above should make clear that the Aristotelian influence is present if not as pervasive as Markku Eskelinen claims. An earlier text on games, Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre*, does make heavy use of Aristotle, so Eskelinen is perhaps unifying Laurel and Murray's work under a single banner or even conflating them.

events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events”—*text*—“a spoken or written discourse which undertakes their [the events’] telling”—and *narration*—“the act or process of production,” both real (author) and fictional (narrator) (3). The terms originating in Russian formalism—*fabula* (the story) and *sjuzet* (the order of the events as told)—also make the core distinction, though Abbott argues that *sjuzet* is not as “inclusive” a term as *narrative discourse* (18). In short, the *story*, or the events, are considered at least partially distinct from the way in which that story is told, the *narrative discourse*. These two elements combine to form what narratologists call *narrative*.

Murray, as I’ve shown above, is probably more interested in *story*, at least in a narratological sense. Notably, she doesn’t engage much with the formal structure of narrative discourse: representations of time, focalization, narrative levels, and other concepts key to examining narrative discourse don’t enter into Murray’s discussions. In part, this might be explained by the speculative focus of *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, but it’s also reasonable to conclude that Murray’s interests lie in the *experience* of the reader or player—the reading of *Tetris*, ultimately, relies on this element, and the frequent evocation of *drama* throughout her work suggests an interest more in the pleasures of reading and play than, say, the structural makeup of texts or games. Put simply, Murray, aside from some mention of Propp, does not seem to actually use narratology, nor can she really be considered a narratologist.

This sets up a curious scenario. The terms of the debate, even its name, indicate that *narratology* and its concepts are being applied—and, according to the ludologists, inappropriately—to games. But, as we'll see below, the use of actual narratological concepts appears overwhelmingly in the work of the ludologists. While Murray's terms require some in-depth analysis to define, the ludologists are much more forthcoming with definitions of the terms both of narratology and of ludology. That said, I would argue that their relationship with terminology is no less troubled than Murray's, in spite of their repeated insistence that the *other* side was having trouble with terms. This is most evident in the ways in which ludologists attempt to undermine the effectiveness of narratological terms and concepts in order to advance different—often “new”—terms in their stead. The Frasca<sup>44</sup> coined term *ludology* is, itself, something of a neologism, but the main load of terministic wrangling comes in the work of Aarseth and Eskelinen.

Most of Aarseth's *Cybertext* is made up of chapters that take on a particular kind of ergodic text and examining particular critical terms and approaches and their effectiveness before ultimately proposing an approach that accounts for what other approaches cannot. A fairly representative example of this approach can be seen in Aarseth's engagement with semiotics as a model for game criticism. After an extensive discussion—and rejection—of a computer based semiotic typology presented by Peter

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<sup>44</sup> Frasca, interestingly, seems to have moved on to other interests more quickly than other participants in the debate. Aside from coining the term ludology, his only direct—or explicit—contribution to the discussion seems to be his 2003 conference talk, “Ludologists Love Stories Too,” which I discuss below.



Bøgh Andersen, Aarseth wonders, rhetorically, how to approach other computer semiologies, concluding that

it would of course be preposterous to reject in advance all semiotic typologies of computer-based communication just because one typology has proven unsuitable to our needs. However, the lessons learned from the experience with one semiology can be generalized and so construed as arguments against the sufficiency of a semiotic approach. (*Cybertext* 39)

This is not necessarily unreasonable, of course, but it is complicated somewhat by other approaches examined—and rejected—throughout the text. Responding to certain readings of adventure games (specifically the text based game *Adventure*) that rely on Wolfgang Iser's narrative *gaps*—missing parts of a narrative that a reader fills in as he or she reads—Aarseth observes the difference between metaphor and actuality; gaps in games are not the same as gaps in narrative texts. To wit, in a narrative text the reader mentally provides the connection, filling in the blank of the open space, whereas in a game, a player must provide actual input, and that input must be correct or sufficient to satisfy the conditions and advance (Aarseth likens these kinds of gaps to keyholes rather than openings) (*Cybertext* 110-111). What is seen as a narrative gap, then, “is in fact not a narrative phenomenon but is related to the game's structure in a fundamentally different way” (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 111). What is most notable here is not necessarily Aarseth's (fairly solid) arguments about the usefulness of a particular narratological concept, but rather his conclusion about narratology in general. That gaps, as a concept, are not particularly applicable to games “seems to suggest that the standard concepts of narratology are not sufficient to explain the literary phenomena of adventure games, and certainly not their difference from other types of literature” (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 111).

This is a particular instance of a generalization reached very quickly from a single complication, a fairly common occurrence throughout the debate. Just as the failure of one semiology provided arguments against others, one particular narratological concept seems to have provided ample arguments against other narratological concepts.

Two observations can be made here. First, Aarseth's generalization about narratological concepts seems to assume a uniformity in narratology that is not necessarily present. Second, this kind of argument is, naturally enough, in line with Aarseth's project to move away from established critical models, but it also hints at his stance toward the terminology of those models. After dismissing semiotics in general, Aarseth argues that no such approach (especially semiotics) should be privileged when examining ergodic texts; "instead, due to the lack of any suitable ready-made formalisms, this study is forced into an eclectic and pragmatic approach, which is quite appropriate considering the relatively unexplored nature of our domain" (*Cybertext* 41). This eclectic approach involves the coining of a number of neologisms, *cybertext* and *ergodic* being two examples. There are more such terms than the scope of this chapter can accommodate, but it is important to consider the origin of this particular approach, namely the problematic, in Aarseth's estimation, nature of extant terminology.

One particular source of problematic terms is the entertainment industry. In a impressive critique of the etymology and usage of "interactive," Aarseth points to the industrial origin of the term and how easily "commercial rhetoric is accepted uncritically by academics with little concern for precise definitions or implicit ideologies" (*Cybertext*

48). In this case, the connotation of “interactive” is dominant, as it conjures “various vague ideas of computer screens, user freedom, and personalized media, while denoting nothing” (*Cybertext* 48). The ideological baggage is fairly serious, however, as it is born from the same sort of technological determinism discussed above. The very presence of something “interactive” allows for some sort of liberatory advancement, or, in Aarseth’s estimation, “to declare a system interactive is to endorse it with a magic power” (*Cybertext* 48). “Linearity” also comes in for criticism as a term laden with the ideological imprint of critical theory, especially as it relates to hypertext and hypertext scholarship (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 47). Furthermore, these terms are not particularly descriptive. Aarseth discusses at length how misleading both interactive and linear tend to be, as they are more evocative than accurate, more connotative of ideas exciting and oppressive, respectively.

The result of these terminological analyses is a more or less total rejection of extant terminology. Bearing, as they do, the unexamined ideological imprint of both commercial and disciplinary interests, these terms under analysis indicate a “lack of rigorous terminology” in discussions of computer media (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 59). What is needed, then, is

a terminology that has distinctive power as well as unproblematic connotations ... a terminology is constructed [by Aarseth] that is not grounded in computer industrial rhetoric (cf. *Hypertext, interactive, virtual*, etc.) but purely on observable differences in the behavior between text and reader (user). (*Cybertext* 59)

Aarseth, in essence, claims to coin a largely neutral terminology for discussion of cybertexts.

But even Aarseth's own terms, *cybertext* and *ergodic*, are not entirely without some baggage. Cybertext derives from the "discipline" of cybernetics, and ergodic is "appropriated" from physics (*Cybertext* 1). As we've seen, the ludologist project is also circumscribed by the boundaries of academic disciplinarily—the ludologists are separatists, yes, but ones that wish to stay within the boundaries of academic institutions. In the end, there is very little space to be had within those boundaries for anything "new," and, as Eskelinen's work indicates, "new" terms may not be much more than new uses for established terms.

Much of Eskelinen's work takes explicit and direct aim at critiquing, or even dismissing, narratology in general. Eskelinen frequently adopts Aarseth's term cybertext as a model, or perspective, and he argues that cybertext provides the opportunity to explore new avenues that narratology and hypertext theory could not. Indeed, Eskelinen, in his essay in the first edition of *Cybertext Yearbook*, "(Introduction to) Cybertext Narratology," focuses, at considerable length, on "drowning narratology by numbers," or pointing out the exponentially more numerous and complex kinds of variables and functions in cybertext as opposed to traditional texts or hypertexts (61). In cybertexts, there are, by Eskelinen's reckoning, thousands of functions (types of time and narrative situations, for example), far too many for narratology's models. Cybertext, then, provides a legitimate challenge to the tenets of narratology, while hypertext merely "stayed static" and was replaced ("(Introduction to)" 66). Implicit in Eskelinen's argument seems to be

the celebration of cybertext as a disruptive form that challenges both narratology and, by extension, the literary establishment.

Much of Eskelinen's work that focuses primarily on games maintains this same explicit stance, but his engagement with terms and with narratological terms in particular at times seems inconsistent or overly selective. As we've already seen, Eskelinen attempts to "'exhaust' classical narratology" in order to illustrate the shortcomings of other narratological approaches to games that have made "naïve comparisons between narratives and games" as a result of "too narrow, broad or feeble definitions" of narrative ("Towards" 37). But, subsequently, Eskelinen himself seems to select narrow definitions, namely the definition of narrative, derived from the work of Gerald Prince and Gerard Genette, that requires the presence of a "narrative situation," or a narrator and narratee. Eskelinen posits that such situations simply do not exist in games—except when they do, in which case they are "at the service of ergodic dominant" ("Towards" 37). In a similar fashion, Eskelinen notes that the view of narrative taken by Christian Metz, that narratives create a time scheme in terms of another, does not apply to games, as they have but one time scheme, "the movement from the beginning to the winning or some other situation" ("Towards" 39). But, here again, if there is such a case, it doesn't matter: "[i]n cases where another time scheme is invented, it is not as important as the first one" (Eskelinen, "Towards" 39). This seeming ambivalence about these particular aspects of narrative are actually of a piece with what Eskelinen does for the rest of his *First Person* essay: after this process of "exhausting" narratology, he then claims that "narratology is

not completely useless, if its key concepts and distinctions are not taken for granted but traced back to their roots” (“Towards” 39). Eskelinen then, at length, applies concepts from narratology to games.

But Eskelinen’s stance remains fairly consistent: he uses only what Genette labeled “formal narratology.” Genette, for his part, separates “thematic” narratology, or “analysis of the story or narrative content,” from “formal” narratology, or “analysis of narrative as a mode of ‘representation’ of stories, in contrast to the nonnarrative modes like the dramatic and, no doubt, some others outside literature” (*Narrative* 16). For Genette, both the term *narratology* and *narrative* should be applied in “a strict use (that is, one *referring to mode*)” (*Narrative* 17). Needless to say, this is a very specific use of these terms, one that is not, perhaps, as inclusive as those argued for by Abbott. In borrowing this formal narratology label from Genette, Eskelinen more or less ensures that the conversations will stay “technical” or very specific—this keeps both *narrative* and *narratology* firmly anchored to *mode* and eliminates any consideration of story. But the terms used are imported almost directly, though “transformed into an open series of ludological components” (“Towards” 38). Eskelinen, in fact, uses some of Genette’s terms in this fashion to describe events and temporal relations in games, finding that “[a]n almost ready-made set of temporal relations can be derived from print and film narratologies -- this act gives us six categories to study: order, speed, duration, frequency, simultaneity, and the time of action” (“Towards” 40). Eskelinen, makes *considerable* use of narratology (he also borrows from Bremond and others), but only the part of

narratology that concerns itself with the mechanics of events, actions, etc. Story, then, along with characters, plot, and so on, are, for Eskelinen relegated to those “narrow, broad or feeble” definitions of narrative, and are not useful for considering the actions taken by players to configure—to borrow Aarseth’s term—the game. This leaves stories, in Eskelinen’s estimation, as “uninteresting ornaments” or “marketing tools” that should be ignored (“The Gaming”).

All of this contributes to the main quirk of the narratology versus ludology debate: only the ludologists make use of narratology, and there are, in effect, no actual narratologists active in the debate (with the possible exception of Marie-Laure Ryan, who I’ll return to below). Frasca even acknowledges this issue in his seemingly conciliatory conference talk, “Ludologists Love Stories Too.” In that talk, Frasca attempts to defuse the debate by pointing to the key misunderstandings that breed the conflict. Frasca originally introduced the term “ludology” as a complementary concept, a way of augmenting narratology to discuss games (“Ludologists” 94). Citing both his language and Aarseth’s on the differences and overlaps between game and story, Frasca claims that the supposed separatist bent of ludology is a false characterization. Further, the identification of “narratologists” as a faction is also a misunderstanding, as no one involved in the debate can be adequately identified as a narratologist (“Ludologists”94). In addition, ludologists have frequently been misquoted, and Frasca points specifically to Eskelinen’s claim about stories being “uninteresting ornaments” as an argument taken out

of context and presented as an example of radicalism (“Ludologists” 95).<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, the primary division in the debate, it seems, is that ludologists use broadly accepted definitions, whereas the narrativists (a more accurate term than narratologists) don’t define their terms (“Ludologists” 96). Frasca specifically names Pearce as one scholar who has this problem, as she uses a broader definition of narrative to talk about Macbeth and chess (in her *First Person* essay) (“Ludologists” 97). This kind of disparity in definition, for Frasca, is the primary problem; after all, academic tradition demands clear terms.

But as I’ve argued, the definitions of terms—broadly accepted or otherwise—don’t quite seem to be the issue. Given the stance taken by ludologists toward the terms of narratology—an ambivalent mix between rejection and appropriation—it’s hard to imagine any definition of terms offered by the “narrativists” that would have ameliorated their agonistic approach. Indeed, Jenkins did offer definitions of terms—specifically of story, or of film scholar Kristin Thompson’s use of *fabula* and *sjuzet* (“Game Design” 126)—but was subsequently accused by Eskelinen of not defining terms (“Markku Eskelinen’s Response [to Jenkins’]”). The problem, ultimately, seems to be more of an issue of *story*, in the narratological sense, than *narrative*. As we’ve seen, Aarseth rejects terms from other disciplines primarily due to their metaphorical basis: print codex texts are *figurative* labyrinths whereas cybertexts (including games) are *literal* ones requiring actual configuration. Eskelinen, then, imports terms almost wholesale from narratology,

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<sup>45</sup> Frasca’s expanded look at this quote still doesn’t quite account for its full context. As I demonstrate above, Eskelinen’s focus generally uses formal narratology explicitly to exclude *story* and favor the *mode*.



but only the technical terms that speak to *mode*—the events and actions in a text become, in this case, various types of manipulations in games.

I would suggest that even had Murray offered very clear definitions of her terms, or described them in a fashion as I have above, the ludologists who sought (and found, it seems), narratology everywhere would likely still have rejected her interest and approach. Ultimately, the difference is not so much in how these critics attempted to define their terms, but rather that their goals were always at odds. In narratological terms, Murray was interested in *story*, and the ludologists were interested in *narrative discourse*, broadly speaking.

### **Stances Toward Critical Theory**

While the main *barrier to communication* at this threshold of invisibility can be located within the use of terms, it's also important to note that the various terministic screens are influenced somewhat by various views of critical theory. This is a fairly accessible quality in, say, Aarseth's work, given that he spends considerable effort attempting to break from several different critical approaches. Likewise, Eskelinen's celebration of cybertext theory as a disruptive force for traditional scholarship and theory is notable, since much of his focus targets narratology in particular (in spite of his appropriation of its terms later on). This speaks somewhat to that basis for Frasca's original coining of ludology, as a discipline to unify the study of games the way narratology had done so for the study of narrative. But, as Bogost points out, this view of narratology as some sort of unifying discipline doesn't quite add up—it's more a

particular (structuralist) approach to a specific topic, and not, necessarily, a particularly common one, at least in English and Literary Studies departments in the United States. As we've seen, both Aarseth and Eskelinen are committed to dismissing older approaches and their ideological baggage in favor of new ones—cybertext theory is, in this view, *new* theory arising in the place of a no longer useful collection of text-based, figurative theories. To put it simply, the ludologists attempt to move beyond critical theory into new realms.

This post-theory stance is likely influential in the way that ludologists regarded and responded to the work of someone like Murray. Eskelinen, in particular, offered numerous jabs at Murray's work, some explicit and some implicit, but the general sense of his view might be summarized in his condemnation of “the seriously and hilariously obsolete presuppositions of Aristotelian drama, commedia dell'arte, Victorian novels, and Propopian folklore continue to dominate the scene” of discourse on games (“The Gaming”). Eskelinen sees these approaches—most of them noticeable in Murray's work—as “an attempt to skip the 20th century altogether and avoid any intellectual contact with it, a consumerist double assassination of both the avant-garde and advanced theory” (“The Gaming”). On the one hand, I think that this particular view speaks to the general divisiveness—that “fundamentalism”—of the ludological perspective discussed above, in addition to a move toward presenting or performing a certain amount of rigor in Eskelinen's (and other ludologists') work that likely seeks some amount of academic or professional legitimacy as a result. But we can reasonably ask how accurately these

accusations—however harsh—may be. I would suggest that some of the values underpinning Murray’s work (and terministic screen) might address some of this issue.

Some insight into Murray’s values can be derived from the introduction to *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. As we’ve seen, Murray is interested in *dramatic* experiences, and these experiences are, in her view, often authored by creative individuals—great authors or “cyberbards.” There is, in fact, a considerable emphasis on creativity in the early pages of Murray’s text, most notably in her description of the divide between “suits” and “hackers” in the computer industry of the late 1960s. Murray lauds the creativity and talent of the hacker figure as one of the “great creative wellsprings of our time” (*Hamlet* 9), remembering, in particular, a rendition of the Marine Corps Hymn on the punch-card computers at IBM (*Hamlet* 3). In this instance, “when programming was fun, it was a lot like that performance,” or, in short, programmers and their creativity evoked the same “dramatic” satisfaction Murray felt in reading Victorian novels (*Hamlet* 3). But the hacker’s genius is set in stark contrast with the “suit” figure, the figure of the businessman or executive; Murray recounts a particular encounter with her manager at IBM in which he seemed to reduce *War and Peace* to mere “output” (*Hamlet* 3). Suits, then, are a sort of capitalist, primarily reductionist stereotype, evoking more a feeling of the mechanistic and economic than the literary.

It is the reductionist stifling of creativity that Murray finds so objectionable (she handed in a permanent resignation in reaction to the *War and Peace* comment), which is why the continued dichotomy between hacker (or cyberbard) and suit in academia might

be crucial here. Murray's narrative of her career as a scholar after her time at IBM (all of this is recounted in the introduction) covers a realization in the early 1980s that somehow "literature and academic feminism itself seemed somehow to have fallen into the hands of the suits" (*Hamlet* 4). "Suits," in this case, seems to refer to literary theorists, presumably adherents of the "theory boom" in literary studies. For Murray, the new emphasis on theory seems to be as reductive as calling the novel computer output;

the new theoreticians no longer saw the novel as the 'bright book of life' but as an infinite regression of words about words about words. Joining in this conversation involved learning a discourse as arcane as machine code, and even further from experience. Truth and beauty were nowhere in sight. (*Hamlet* 4-5)

Ultimately, *meaning* is the core issue—as discussed above, *meaning* is one of the key terms in Murray's formulation of literature. Theorists become reductionists, in Murray's view, for "denouncing meaning as something to be deconstructed into absurdity" (*Hamlet* 5). This is evidence of a split in disciplinary ideology. Though Murray does not identify it as an ideological division—the theorists, in fact, would be more likely to make the observation—her classification of theorists as suits, grouping them with a narrow view of literature held elsewhere in her narrative by business executives (an interesting irony, considering the tendency of many theoretical frames to target economic power structures) creates a scenario of struggle, an agonistic scene pitting creative genius—the garret model cyberbard—against reductive attacks on *meaning*—literary theorists that, not incidentally, suggest the "death of the author." It's important to note that Murray is not accusing theorists of *being* business executives, but the connection between the two (the

explicit use of the term to describe both) is based more on their views of what she values in the literary and how both executives *and* theorists seem to threaten it.

Curiously enough, the “suit” figure does not recur much throughout *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, especially after she marks her departure from a strictly literary frame to one based in pedagogy. While *meaning*, for Murray, maybe have been a casualty of the “theory wars,” she is relieved that at the same time “theorists of learning methods were embracing meaning as the key to successful pedagogy” (5). The primary focus of the text is on the author figure, and the suit figure remains more a quality of the scene, enacted more in occasional discussions of technological anxiety or resistance than reductionism—such as Shakespeare scholars who cannot “separate the activities of research from the particular form that they had historically assumed” (*Hamlet* 8). This is how the second quality of her configuration of the author—the primarily promissory nature of the cyberbard’s genius, comes into play. *Hamlet on the Holodeck* is not necessarily a book about the struggle of creativity against reductionism (though this is a quality of the scene) so much as a text on the potential of creativity in the digital realm—the latent potential of literary art in cyberspace. Much of Murray’s language—especially in her conclusion—reflects this speculative bent, as Shakespeares, Eliots, Tolstoys, cyberdramatists and cyberbards of the future might “create kaleidoscopic worlds of dazzling variety that will display the coherence and unified vision we associate with great fiction” (*Hamlet* 276). Indeed, while much of the text provides general overviews of various aspects of cyberspace (loosely defined, it seems), such as computer games, MUDs, hypertext, and

the aesthetics and authorship traits of these forms, Murray's routine references to development, both of the author figure (the Shakespeare of the future) and the authored forms, fit in with a larger narrative of development that provides the primary organizing principle for her analysis of *narrative*, *literature*, and *meaning*.

In brief, Murray sees critical theory—the academic “suits”—as a force working against what she values: meaning, story, etc. Murray's stance might be described, then, as “pre-theory,” since she doesn't value the contributions of critical theory to the study of texts or, potentially, digital forms like games. Here is one last *barrier to communication* at this threshold of invisibility: one side of the “debate” holds that theory has been exhausted and can no longer provide useful insight into new forms (the “post-theory” ludologists), while the other never saw particular value in critical theory's views of text or other forms to begin with (the “pre-theory” narrativists, mostly Murray). This divide, taken with the wrangling over terms examined in the last section, recasts the debate somewhat. Ultimately, it seems that the speculative, pre-theory views advanced by Murray—and Murray alone, it seems—incited a particular type of backlash by scholars interested in establishing a new discipline, respected in its own right, based on a highly technical, almost proprietary approach to “new” critical theory that could succeed where older theories had (allegedly) failed. In 2005, when the narratology versus ludology debate had effectively petered out, Murray would claim (fairly accurately, I believe) that ludology was primarily an ideological stance that advocated a kind of “game essentialism,” which attempted to ignore anything but the abstract formalism of games,

and questioned the professionalism of anyone doing otherwise (“The Last Word”). Murray sees little value in the arguments that came out of the debate, and given the attendant issues discussed in the next and final section, this seems a fair assessment.

### **Conclusion: Overlooking the Matter at Hand**

The problems within the narratology versus ludology debate are, more generally, the types of problems that can arise in a threshold of invisibility. The extremism, to the point of almost self-acknowledged reductionist “fundamentalism,” of the ludologists has been covered at length, along with the open secret of its goal to establish a new discipline. And Murray’s type of approach, the speculative interest in creativity, while perhaps unfairly—and even unethically—maligned, was ultimately more focused on her own, “pre-theory” interests in storytelling. Neither of these approaches, the ludological or (inaccurately named) narratological, actually focused on the main point of emphasis: games themselves; the emphasis was often either political (establishing a new discipline) via “essentialism” or on some view of games as the critics involved (from both sides) hoped they would one day be. These problems did not pass unnoticed, either at the time or since.

In many ways, the debate, while ostensibly about theorizing games, often prevented any such theorization from taking place. While Aarseth and Eskelinen did offer some—largely borrowed—terms and points of emphasis, their focus on particular functions seemed to be outweighed by their *calling* for new terms. And, as Mary Flanagan points out in her response to Pearce in *First Person*, “calling for new language

and methodologies with which to consider computer games is not the same thing as writing them” (145). This “dirty work,” Flanagan argues, is only now (in 2004) beginning. And Pearce herself underscores another issue. Responding to Frasca’s seemingly conciliatory move in “Ludologists Love Stories Too,” Pearce observes that Frasca’s piece does little more than reinforce the false polarity that it attempts to dispel. The result is that only one game, chess, is ever mentioned, and this is a larger trend in which scholars are forced by other scholars into positions that they have no interest in taking (“Theory Wars”). The lack of focus—and the forced lack of focus—on games is noticeable throughout the debate. Examples of actual games are rare, and some texts—like Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck* and Aarseth’s *Cybertext*—spend considerable time on relatively narrow sets of games, such as MUDs, that were not readily available to general audiences. And some of the texts most heavily involved in the actual debate mention very few games at all; Eskelinen’s “The Gaming Situation,” for instance, mentions only *Tetris* and *Civilization*, an abstract “puzzle” game and a strategy game (ones notably bereft of “story” elements). This, paired with the tendency of contributors to focus more on a promissory conception of games (rather than what they were at the time) seems to have obscured useful or productive discourse on games themselves.

As a result, the difficult work of theorizing games as they were—that is, a complex, multimedia form with interesting implications for and challenges to established discourse—was never really a primary focus of discussion. Subsequent work on games has exposed much of their potential for influencing a vibrant discourse on games,



narrative, and even on discourse itself. Writing after the debate had more or less concluded, Adam Rovner suggests that games and their narratives are worth studying “if for no other reason than the challenge they present to mimetic theory” and the issues highlighted by the misapplication of Aristotelian poetics to narrative theory (108). Likewise, Jesper Juul’s *Half-Real* and Marie-Laure Ryan’s *Avatars of Story*, both written mostly after the debate, do set out to examine how rules and narrative in games might be theorized productively, and what old assumptions they may challenge. Juul, who had been previously been a staunch ludologist, posits a model of computer games as a balance between two elements: rules and fiction. As the two are often difficult to separate, Juul examines how they work with and against each other to create the game experience. In short, rules are real—they dictate the playing of the game—and fiction is just that, fictional—the elements of the game making up its fictional world (dragons, spaceships, and so on). Taken together, the interaction makes games “half-real,” composed of real rules and fictional worlds (163). For Juul, “the emphasis on fictional worlds may be the strongest innovation of the videogame,” making the interaction of rules and fiction of prime importance (162). Ryan sets out to “correct” a narratological focus on the literary—one resulting from the influence of Genette—and shift it to transmedial consideration (*Avatars* 4). She uses a much broader definition of narrative, as “the textual actualization of story, while story is narrative in a virtual form” (*Avatars* 7).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> I’ve discussed some of the ideas behind this definition above, but this particular definition is derived from Abbott’s: “narrative is *the representation of an event or a series of events*” (13). Ryan draws

In this way, she moves away from the question “are games stories?” to a more inclusive one: “do games have narrativity?” (*Avatars* 181). Ryan suggests that the focus of the study of games should be how the fictional world of a game relates to the playfield, a focus she dubs a functional “ludo-narrativism” (*Avatars* 203). For Ryan, the unique achievement of games is the integration of play and narrative, and she takes this interaction as the focus of study (*Avatars* 182).

While much of the debate focused on the promissory qualities of games as a medium or form—how great games might be in the future, if given the time to develop properly—these later scholars identified the value in theorizing games for the invigoration of discourse on games, media, and narrative, along with their very interesting potential for reinvigorating and reshaping established discourses and practices. As I’ve demonstrated in this chapter, the discourse at and around thresholds of invisibility can often mask the primary focus, or topic, of conversation and its actual implications. The case of the narratology versus ludology debate illustrates all four of the elements of thresholds that I’ve proposed. *Habituation* of terms, such as Murray’s use of *narrative* and *story*, demonstrate some hazards in examining new forms without some reflexivity, which is a point that was (partially) made by the ludologists. The *competing narrativizations* of the debate, which pitted arguments for continuity of story (Murray) against those for discontinuity (ludology), masked both the real challenges offered by games to established ideas of narrative *and* their broader, potentially instructive

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specifically from Abbott’s differentiation between story and narrative discourse (Abbott 15-16). Ryan cites the first edition of Abbott’s text (2002), where I cite the second (2008).

connections to different media (Jenkins, Juul, Ryan, and Rover all address these factors in their work). The confusion of *synchronic and diachronic* elements likewise obscured the topic of discussion, games as they were at the time, with an emphasis on a promissory view of the medium's potential, as influenced by narratives of development of other media. Cumulatively, these elements, along with the particular stances toward critical theory and definitions of key terms of both sides, resulted in a significant *barrier to communication* that not only prevented productive discussion but also generated an almost fictitious account of the discussion: that it was a clear-cut debate between narratologists and ludologists. One potential use of the threshold of invisibility concept, then, is to allow for examination of these “non-debates” in scholarly discourse and to organize a sustained focus for analysis of the terministic screens that come together at that particular moment. In other words, this allows us to identify the underpinning issues—ideological, narratological, speculative, or otherwise—that inform these kinds of misunderstandings.

### **Interchapter Three: The Image/Text Problem**

In Chapters Two and Three, I explored the wide range of discourses at two thresholds of invisibility, discussions on digital photography and debates on video games, respectively. In preparation for the final chapter, which examines the critical etymology and influence of specific terms (*affordances* and *constraints*) as they move through a threshold of invisibility, this interchapter will briefly address a long-standing “problem” about the relation between text-centered and image-centered forms and the conversations surrounding that problem. I will begin by examining a somewhat famous stance on the visual—taken by Frederic Jameson—as an illustration of a particular set of influences on critical discourse on images, one that culminates in a hierarchy that places text above image in terms of critical or intellectual value. I will then explore, primarily through the work of W.J.T. Mitchell, the complicated relationship between text and image—what might be called the “image/text problem”—and how that relationship often exerts influence on discussions of both. Ultimately, this interchapter seeks to complicate the apparently “obvious” distinction between *image* and *text* as operative terms in critical discourse, and to uncover particular dimensions of the relationship between the terms that may present problems for critics attempting to theorize them at other thresholds of invisibility.

This brief exploration of the “conversation” on text and image might productively begin with Frederic Jameson’s somewhat famous dictum that “The visual is *essentially* pornographic” (1). Jameson’s oft-cited formulation is worth reproducing in full:

The visual is *essentially* pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object; while the most austere films necessarily draw their energy from the attempt to repress their own excess (rather than from the more thankless effort to discipline the viewer). Pornographic films are thus only the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body. (Jameson 1)

This is a provocative and poignant way to begin a collection of essays on film, not least because of the connotative baggage of the central term. Pornography is notoriously difficult to define, yet Jameson posits that this quality describes the very *essence* of the visual, that it “has its end in rapt, mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object” (1). If “pornographic” weren’t enough to suggest inferiority, “mindless fascination” seems to clinch for the visual a subordinate, uncritical, or even disreputable aura. Perhaps more importantly, this particular facet of the visual is capable of infecting “thinking about” (and, presumably, critical writing about) the visual—a formulation that seems, at the least, a suggestion that the visual and its criticism are less than fully valuable in the critical sense: “mindless” evokes a lack of critical worth, and “pornographic” hints at illicit qualities or even general illegitimacy.

But some of my own, intentionally labored word choices in the previous paragraph—“less than fully valuable”—are intended to underscore a particular quality of Jameson’s apparent indictment of the visual: unlike some theorists who take an openly

negative or condemnatory stance on “the visual” or “the image” (Jean Baudrillard comes to mind), Jameson never explicitly argues that the visual is worthless, misleading, or dangerous. Indeed, much of Jameson’s short but rhetorically rich introduction to *Signatures of the Visible* treats the issues of writing about the visual, specifically film, and comparisons between criticism on film and criticism on the novel. While the comparison undoubtedly favors the novel, Jameson concludes that criticism of film might be of some value for critics.

Jameson’s initial statement (and much of his introduction) reflects what seems to be a widely shared view of the visual, and possibly contains an equally common, yet largely implicit view: the visual is pornographic (or, as I understand Jameson, rooted in spectacle, in attraction, in the complexities of the gaze) *in essence*, as opposed to other forms that are not. At the risk of introducing my own provocative statement, it seems that the “other forms” in question are, almost without exception, textual. Jameson, perhaps not surprisingly, gestures in this direction in the rest of his introduction to *Signatures of the Visible*. It may be more appropriate to say, rather, that Jameson’s introduction exhibits tendencies toward the visual quite common throughout critical discourse and thus provides a brief, but useful, introduction into the image/text problem.

The primary focus of the essays in *Signatures of the Visible* is film, and much of the introduction deals with the question of writing about film and the central claim that the visual’s “coming into being” must be effectively historicized to be properly understood (Jameson 1). This history, according to Jameson, is the primary focus of the

collected essays. But, in effect, *writing about* film is the central focus of the introduction. Jameson evokes Baudelaire and Proust on the physicality of memory, connecting the visual to physical experience and memory, and even claiming that, given the ubiquity of the sensations of film (reminiscence, addiction, the body), it is odd that film “should be assigned to a specialized discipline, but also that we could ever hope to write about it without self-indulgence” (2). Next evoked is Roland Barthes, and the idea of “scriptable” writing, or writing that “made you wish to write further yourself” (Jameson 2). Finally, and almost predictably, Jameson brings in the relations, the family of film: “the conception of film presupposed here is one in which the closest relative of the medium remains the novel” (4). He does not establish an explicit hierarchy of value, but the remainder of the introduction more contrasts than compares thinking on the two forms, and while Jameson doubts that the study of film will have the “philosophical or historical value” of the study of the novel, it may nonetheless offer insight into the “dialectic of realism, modernism, and postmodernism” that he has previously “misrepresented by staging one or the other in isolation” (5-6). Studying film can bring such important concepts together and provide useful intersections. But a difference still remains: the value of studying, of theorizing and writing about the visual is not the same value as studying, theorizing, and writing about the textual.

On the one hand, this seems obvious enough, though statements such as “text and image differ” or “it’s hard to write about the visual” do not strike the same chord as labeling the visual, in essence, pornographic. But Jameson’s statement need not be read

(and probably shouldn't be read) as an indictment of the visual. There is, after all, value in studying film. But statements such as "text and image are related," "text and image both have value," or even "text and image can be in dialectic" might be considered provocative as well, though not as evocative of pornography, perhaps because the differences between text and image are assumed. Interestingly, the difficulty of writing about the visual may be the most productive point of emphasis in this paragraph, as obvious as it may seem. An extended or unpacked look at the statement may run in one of several directions, but the key issue, as hinted at in Jameson's introduction, is, in my phrasing, that "it's difficult to write about the visual because it's different from the textual," or even more appropriately, "it's difficult to write about the visual because it's different from writing about the textual." It is obvious that the textual and visual, specifically the imagistic, are "different," though the nuances of the distinction might certainly warrant their own critical study. What is not, strangely, as obvious is that writing about the two might raise serious questions about that writing itself. More directly, the terms that Jameson utilizes when writing about the visual *and* the textual have considerable influence on what he has to say.

As such, an analysis of Jameson's terms and the structure of his arguments can provide insight both into his stance and to the broader question of image/text. Jameson's essay collection is focused on film, but his famous first line makes no direct mention of *film* until the third clause. The guiding term at the start of the introduction, then, is *visual*, specifically as denoted with the definitive article. This is the broadest in a cluster of terms



that both name and assign attributes to the main topic of the essay. *Visual*, or *the visual*, is the key term—paired very loosely with the “visible” of the book’s title—while *film*, “films,” and “movies” are all associated and used more or less interchangeably (Jameson 1). Along with making a statement regarding essence, Jameson puts forward *visual* as the primary descriptor or quality of *film*—and the essay that follows associates a number of what seem to be essential qualities of *the visual* with *film*; these qualities, then, form part of the associational cluster that establishes the nature of *film* in general. The first quality associated with the provocative *pornographic* is “mindless fascination,” or the general function of film as asking the viewer to “stare at the world as if it were a naked body” (1). Perhaps not surprisingly, *the visual* is here associated with the gaze and the sensory, most notably the body: “movies are a physical experience, and are remembered as such, stored up in bodily synapses that evade the thinking mind” (1). Jameson also draws connections to memory, but by evoking Baudelaire and Proust, he connects memory with the body, with the physical, rather than the psychological (1). *Film* is thus placed definitively in the realm of the physical body, and as such carries with it a sense of the visceral. In this vein, *film* is also an “addiction that leaves its traces on the body” (2). The negative connotations of both *pornographic* and “addiction” are surely clear. Jameson thus collects a cluster of terms that connect *film* with its (almost exclusively) *visual* quality, a feature of the physical *body* that is *mindless*, *pornographic*, and *addictive*. This particular treatment of the visual seems to hint at a feeling of viscosity or even depravity. The

*visual*, based as it is in the visceral, thus presents part of the conceptual or philosophical problem for Jameson: how can this thing be written about without “self-indulgence”?

*Writing*, on the other hand, is at the core of an associational cluster with a much different, and possibly brighter, appearance. Canonical literary figures such as Baudelaire and Proust are evoked very early in Jameson’s text—they of course have drawn connections between the body and memory—and a concept from Roland Barthes (scriptable texts, or texts that make you want to write more yourself) is raised immediately after Jameson poses the writing-about-film-as-self-indulgence problem (2).<sup>47</sup> But *writing* is more directly connected with the “closest relative” of the film, the *novel*, and a comparison ensues that fills up much of the remainder of the introduction (4). What is more important than the *novel*, however, is the “social role of criticism of the novel” in a number of cultural traditions (4). *Writing*, *novel*, and *criticism*, then, make up the terms in an associational cluster that is placed in explicit opposition to the visual/film cluster. And the qualities of the former differ significantly from the latter. Where the visual seemed to be bodily and self-indulgent, *criticism* of the *novel* has a “social role” (4). Furthermore, in *criticism*, the “genre of the ‘theory of the novel’ has been capable of a resonance that far transcends mere cultural critique” (4), and *criticism of the novel*, in general, has had considerable “philosophical [and] historical value” to the degree that an aesthetics has actually almost produced a form of ethics (5). *Criticism*, then, is *social*,

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<sup>47</sup> There is a slight implication here of the primacy of Baudelaire and Proust on memory and the body, an understated “they did it before film.” This falls in line with much of the “feel” of textual superiority in Jameson’s introduction.

transcends “cultural critique,” and is grouped with the value of philosophical and historical thought. Where the *visual* was *mindless* and *visceral*, *writing* is *philosophical* and *cerebral*. The mind/body split here is evident, along with its clear preference for the mind. Needless to say, these two associational clusters allow a fairly clear picture of the implied hierarchy of image/text in Jameson’s essay. *Writing*, clearly, is king.

But as I’ve said, Jameson’s statement probably shouldn’t be read as a dismissal of the visual; there is, after all, value in studying film. But it takes Jameson several pages to state that value—as a “sustained rehearsal of the dialectic of realism, modernism and postmodernism” (6). But the distance between pornographic and dialectic is comprised of a surprisingly lengthy commentary on theories of the novel. Saying that the study of film will not yield the same bounty as the study of the novel does not provide an adequate transition from pornographic to dialectic. Rather, Jameson’s seeming detour through criticism of the novel provides a basis to resolve what might be called incompatibilities between the essence of the visual and the essence of the verbal, and specifically—for Jameson—criticism.

Jameson’s conceptual problem is how to write about the visual. If the visual is pornographic, how can it be written about as something other than staring at the world as a naked body? This is where the relation between visual and textual bears some fruit. Jameson, in effect, uses the qualities of the textual to recover some value in the visual. This might be represented in a dissociative pairing as follows:

visual



textual

Since Jameson's focus is on *writing*, however, the pair might be more adequately expressed as writing about the visual/writing about the textual (specifically the novel):

criticism of the visual



criticism of the textual

Barthes' scriptable texts provide the basis for the desire to write about the visual, or about film. The kinship between film and the novel, the latter is the former's "closest cousin," draws a useful comparison that partly legitimates the film as a relative of a more legitimate form, namely the novel (4). The bulk of Jameson's short introduction, indeed, is dedicated to a lengthy discussion of criticism of the novel, most notably Georg Lukacs' *Theory of the Novel*, which posits "the realization or determinate failures of achieved novelistic form as the surest symptom of the possibilities of individual and collective life in the capitalist period" (4). This is at least part of the historical and philosophical value of the study of the novel, but the visual, specifically film, is representative of other symptoms, namely its marks on the "life and work of writers in the twentieth century ... [and] the degree to which going to the movies has been a very basic part of the weekly and even the daily life of modern intellectuals" (5). Writing about the cinema is thus legitimated by its importance in the life of writers and intellectuals, is given credence by

the legitimacy of texts and those who write about texts. Term II, the textual (or textual criticism) provides a criterion by which term I, the visual (or visual criticism) can contribute to actual critical discourse rather than linger as merely pornographic.

By Jameson's reasoning, to write about the visual *as the visual* is to risk self-indulgence. But to write about the visual *as corrected by* or *as framed by* writing about the novel, while still inferior to actually writing about the novel, makes for a marked improvement in critical value. The novel, then, is more than just a convenient cousin of the film; its kinship allows the shortcomings of the visual's essence—the pornographic—to be overcome in favor of locating a productive intersection, or dialectic, of realism, modernism, and postmodernism.

Jameson begins from an orientation that holds text above image in a fairly clear hierarchy—associated as it is with the classic philosophical mind/body split. Subsequently, however, Jameson uses the comparison between film and novel to facilitate a seeming rehabilitation of the visual, bestowing on it a particular function and usefulness. It seems that the new orientation—the “new reality” brought about by dissociation—holds the visual in higher regard, despite maintaining its subordinate place in the hierarchy of forms. But this might be a bit of sleight of hand. What is rehabilitated is *writing about the visual*—criticism of film *might* provide some value. There is no indication that the visual *itself* is anything more than pornographic. Jameson's argument certainly expands the bounds of critical discourse to include criticism of the visual, but it does not necessarily alter the stance toward the visual or attempt to place the image and

the text on more equal footing. The primary terms of this terministic screen, then, remain the terms of *criticism of the textual*—so much so that *criticism of the visual* might be, as Jameson would put it, “an adjunct to that.”

As I mention above, Jameson’s essay is not broadly representative of criticism on or relating to the image/text issue, but it does, I believe, exemplify a discursive pattern wherein existing logocentric orientations seem to expand to the visual by, in actuality, merely apply the same terministic resources to image that they apply to text. This, of course, is a type of tendency—the application of old terms to new forms—that I’ve explored throughout this dissertation. But Jameson’s reasoning brings up some interesting issues about the relation between the visual and the textual. Jameson’s establishment of text as the favored form in a hierarchy is a common move—if not always an explicit one—and might be situated in a broader conversation on text and image.

It seems obvious to state that “texts and images are different,” but some of the differences are not—as the brief glance at Jameson’s introduction indicates—as clear cut as they seem. More directly, the complicated relationship between text and image gives rise to a number of discursive problems. First, the assumption of simplicity, that image and text are neatly separable and clearly defined, gives rise to a number of second order assumptions; rather, when the image/text dichotomy is taken as given, critical discussion moves immediately to the relationship between the two separate entities and an additional problematic assumption: the image is inferior to the text. This, too, is a long standing

assumption, rooted in cultural, historical, and philosophical tendencies toward logophilia and iconophobia. Thus, image and text are assumed to be separate and in a hierarchy dominated by text. These two assumptions constitute the starting point for discourse on what I will call, following W.J.T. Mitchell, the “image/text problem.” But any subsequent discourse is, as I will argue below, inscribed by these problematic assumptions; as a result, numerous bitter (and sometimes violent) disputes have erupted along the fault lines of the image/text: from classical cycles of iconoclasm to modern quarrels over the value—or danger—of images in popular media.

What that larger conversation reveals, though, is that the relationship between the two terms is anything but simple. Jameson’s view of image seems to be rooted in a particular commitment to text—logocentrism—but, logically, it might seem that images and texts, treated outside of this commitment, would not necessarily have to rely on Jameson’s extensive dissociation of the pairing; this returns to what appears to be an obvious difference between text and image, between writing about each. This “obvious” difference, though, could use some closer examination, starting with the terms that are in question. W.J.T. Mitchell suggests that the neat divide between *text* and *image* is not as clean as it at first appears. The term image itself turns out not to be so clear either. In a fifty page gloss of the question “What is an image?”, Mitchell explores a wide range of kinds of images, assembling a family tree of the image that ranges from photographs to mental pictures, from projected images to verbal imagery. Mitchell concludes that, while different disciplines tend to privilege one kind of image over others, the various members

of the image “family” are not as divergent as they seem (*Iconology* 13). More to the point, contrasts between the idea of the image “proper”—the image as a fundamental principle embodying the ideas of semblance, resemblance, and similitude—and the offspring of the image proper—the mental image, the poetic or verbal image—are a bit suspect, owing to the instability of the idea of the image itself (*Iconology* 13-14).

Indeed, “image,” as a term, is no more stable than “text.” Mitchell situates the two in close proximity, even in conjunction. The two don’t seem that separable, in Mitchell’s estimation, as efforts to grasp the essence of the image, or “imaging the invisible,” are necessarily verbal in character (42). Conversely, Mitchell devotes considerable space to discussion of ideas as themselves imagistic, implying a deeply rooted connection between image and explanation. The two are, if anything, often in conjunction:

the dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself. What varies is the precise nature of the weave, the relation of warp and woof. The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs, each claiming for itself certain proprietary rights on a ‘nature’ to which only it has access. (*Iconology* 43)

But these proprietary rights are not necessarily something to be held by either the pictorial or the linguistic; the two are in too much flux for that to be the case. A curious turn of phrase sums up Mitchell’s exploration of the relationship: pictorial images are “inevitably ... contaminated” by language (*Iconology* 42).

“Contamination,” as term and idea, appears elsewhere in studies of the visual. In their essay examining visual culture, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam claim that the visual

never comes ‘pure,’ it is always ‘contaminated’ by the work of other senses (hearing, touch, smell), touched by other texts and discourses, and imbricated in a



whole series of apparatuses – the museum, the Academy, the art world, the publishing industry, even the nation state – which govern the production, dissemination, and legitimation of artistic productions. (55)

But contamination need not carry its normal negative connotation. For Shohat and Stam, a “contaminated” visual culture is a valuable way to move away from narrativizations of art and culture that privilege certain regions (especially Eurocentric perspectives) and particular “stagist” and “progressive” histories (from realism to modernism to postmodernism) (37). These are “impoverished” frameworks for studying art, and they may “collapse entirely” when examining non-European art (Shohat and Stam 37). But a further problem underlies these seemingly predominant views. Critiques of Eurocentric views, at least according to Shohat and Stam, attack and expose their problems, but nevertheless leave the problem intact, as “the actual cultural productions of non-Europeans have been ignored, a neglect which reinscribes the exclusion even while denouncing it, shifting it to another register” (41). In my estimation, this kind of division, Eurocentric and anti-Eurocentric (my term), is yet another dichotomy that hinders productive criticism. Just as, say, the split between a luddite perspective and one invested in techno-euphoria fails to examine the role and influence of technology (an issue explored in Chapter Two), the Eurocentric/anti-Eurocentric split seems to obscure what should be the focus of criticism of art and art history—and this despite the latter perspective’s avowed goal of inclusivity.

Shohat and Stam’s “polycentric” approach seeks to rectify this problem by remaining attentive to art from all cultures and not allowing a specific narrative of development to shape their criticism, focusing rather on multiple conceptions of

temporality and simultaneity (39). Their conception of visual itself seems a bit “contaminated” by the textual, in that they specifically point to the palimpsest concept and label the visual a “language” (just as language has a visual dimension) (39, 55). But the most relevant concept from Shohat and Stam’s essay for the current discussion is their view of the visual as a point of entry (one of many) for criticism, and as one particular means toward interrogating dominant discursive trends in the study of visual culture (55, 37). In this sense, the visual is not “contaminated” in a damning sense, but rather presents a multifarious arena for exploration of cultural, societal, and, yes, textual issues.

Mitchell’s later work, *Picture Theory*, takes up much the same view of the visual, as it is written with the “conviction that the tensions between visual and verbal representations are inseparable from struggles in cultural politics and political culture” (*Picture 3*). While I think this kind of argument can be overstated (“the study of X is the study of everything!”), Mitchell’s observation provides a useful holistic view of the kinds of debates that lead to dichotomies and division—such as the thresholds of invisibility that I’ve explored in previous chapters. The fundamental questions at the core of these “disputes,” such as “what is the role of X new technology in society?” are still important, or as Mitchell indicates, “inseparable” from “struggles in cultural politics and political culture” (*Picture 3*). The value-laden stratification of the dichotomies often generated by these core questions—technology is either good or bad, for instance—seem to do more to ignore the questions than to answer them. The result is the maintenance of binaries such as text/image, not to mention others that occur frequently in scholarly discourse

(explicitly and implicitly): high culture versus low (or mass) culture or scholarly discourse versus popular discourse. Resultant criticism struggles to get away from judgments of value: whether something is good or bad (or, as I will discuss below, whether it is “pure”) seems to become the focus of critical discourse.

Turns to value, though, are perhaps less than surprising, given the deep political and cultural roots of the image/text problem. Reacting to public and political perceptions of academic and public reading and viewing practices in the late 80s and early 90s (specifically the particularly bleak views of the National Endowment for the Humanities [NEH] on the preponderance of television viewers versus readers of traditional literature), Mitchell observes that “‘Word and Image’ is the name of a commonplace distinction between types of representation ... [but] it is also the name of a basic kind of cultural trope, replete with connotations that go beyond merely formal or structural differences” (*Picture 3*) To say, then, that books and television are different is accurate but not wholly sufficient, as

the difference between a culture of reading and a cultural of spectatorship ... is not *only* a formal issue (though it is certainly that); it has implications for the very forms that sociability and subjectivity take, for the kinds of individuals and institutions formed by culture. (Mitchell, *Picture 3*)

If sociability and subjectivity, individuals and institutions are at least partially rooted in different representational systems, then the question is no longer simply ‘representing things in different ways’ but rather ‘how different ways of representing things contribute to the formation of culture,’ or, to wit, “‘Word and Image’ is a deceptively simple label, then, not only for two different kinds of representation, but for deeply contested cultural

values” (Mitchell, *Picture 4*). On the surface, this is obvious enough: a culture of reading is different from a culture of viewing, not only in terms of forms and media, but in terms of participation, attitudes, and practices—reading a book and watching a television program are different activities, are perceived as different activities, and—most notably—are valued differently. This creates a potential problem: the differentiation between representational forms is treated in terms of value first. More to the point, the respective values of each form—simply put, books are good and television is bad—are considered given and as (the only) criteria for analysis, which leads to the predictable conclusion that reading culture is good and viewing culture (or a culture of spectatorship) is bad.

But while this particular set of judgments, which I think are widely accepted or at least widely acceptable, might be the first to come to mind in many cases,<sup>48</sup> Mitchell’s description of the “Word and Image” issue as “deceptively simple” here becomes particularly important. The value judgments that I have referred to are, as I suggested above, surface level issues, resultant conclusions based in the deeper, more foundational “contested cultural values.”<sup>49</sup> Mitchell specifically identifies “the differences between mass and elite culture, between the professional, academic humanities and the ‘public’

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<sup>48</sup> I’m reminded of a visit to my eye doctor, who asked me what this dissertation project “was about.” Before I had finished even a brief summary description, he interrupted and emphatically stated that “kids don’t read enough books these days.” This is precisely the kind of stock assertion that is rooted in the kinds of value assumptions that I treat here and throughout this dissertation. “Students don’t write well enough” is another.

<sup>49</sup> Admittedly, my “detour” through value judgments reflects more of what I perceive as a necessary examination of widespread assumptions on the hierarchical relations of various media than what Mitchell attempts to argue in this particular section of his introduction to *Picture Theory*.

humanities, with the difference between a cultural past dominated by the book, and a cultural future in which the image threatens to take over”—and these are only a few examples, drawn from the NEH’s 1989 report on the humanities in America (*Picture 4*). Mitchell, in rendering these particular points of tension explicit, uncovers some of the core contributing issues that have helped to erect an entire scaffolding of assumptions around the text/image question: the “obvious” differences between text and image are rooted in value-laden judgments—or a hierarchy of value—on media that are in turn rooted in (implicit) cultural and political tensions (mass/elite culture, academic/public humanities, etc.). Without accounting for this structure, criticism of the text/image split risks oversimplification at best and prescribed insights that merely reinforce core assumptions (or dominant cultural and political imperatives) at the worst.

Instead of merely upholding the simplicity of the oppositional binary of text and image, Mitchell makes a useful distinction between the different functions between text and image, underscoring his general move away from a conception of the pair as neatly discrete entities. The various functions are, appropriately, given a visual syntactic representation: “image/text,” with a slash, is “a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation. The term ‘imagetext’ designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text. ‘Image-text,’ with a hyphen, designates *relations* of the visual and verbal” (89).<sup>50</sup> This set of distinctions underscores the variability of

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<sup>50</sup> Note that I have used “image/text” similarly, but my usage is also intended to denote the entire complex of issues. As such, *my* image/text problem is the entire structure that includes Mitchell’s discourse, the

configurations between image and image and, I think, the permeability of the dividing lines between—and, more provocatively, within—each. Mitchell’s work challenges the neat distinction between image and text and provides a valuable baseline for consideration of image/text and of the other thresholds of invisibility that I cover in this dissertation.

In addition to his analysis of the various parts of the “family tree” of the image in *Iconology* and the resultant conclusion that images are “contaminated” by language, Mitchell makes the provocative claim in *Picture Theory* that the seemingly distinct forms of representation, words and images, in fact hold little independent standing. For Mitchell,

The image/text problem is not just something constructed ‘between’ the arts, the media, or different forms of representation, but an unavoidable issue *within* the individual arts and media. In short, all arts are ‘composite’ arts (both text and image); all media are mixed-media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes. (94-95)

This assertion seems, I think, both obvious and counterintuitive. It is most obvious in clearly “mixed” media, such as television and graphic novels, that formally combine both text and image. It is counterintuitive, of course, when we consider other media that seem to rely *primarily* on either image or text. To prove his assertion that “all arts are composite arts,” Mitchell goes to some length to examine—and refute—potential arguments against his claim. One of these counter arguments, Mitchell suggests, would surely assert the existence of “*purely* visual and verbal media, pictures without words and

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discursive problems that form a threshold of invisibility around the issue, and my own rhetorical analyses of those discourses.

words without pictures,” and that to claim that unmixed forms such as poetry and painting are composite “is surely a kind of figurative excess, extending a model that applies literally to mixed-media beyond its proper domain” (*Picture 95*). But this objection is effectively undermined by exploring the differences and conjunctions of literal and figurative considerations of image/text. The obvious examples of mixed media, like the graphic novel, literally include both text and images, but Mitchell observes that supposedly “pure” pictures often incorporate text or recognizable sign systems, and “‘pure’ texts incorporate visuality quite literally the moment they are written or printed in visible form” (*Picture 95*). As such, writing, in fact, “deconstructs the possibility of a pure image or pure text, along with the opposition between the ‘literal’ (letters) and the ‘figurative’ (pictures) on which it depends” (*Picture 95*). Written text, on a page or a screen, can’t escape from its own visual quality—to say nothing of the arrangement of text on the page or the corresponding space around and between words. Images, especially clearly representative pictures and photographs, are, likewise, contaminated by text, often literally including words within their framing.

But a “figurative” application of the image/text division should also be considered. Mitchell’s hypothetical objections to his “all art is composite art” argument also involve verbal (specifically oral) forms with no visible writing and purely abstract images with no immediately obvious representational intent. Any “contamination” in this sense must be “merely” figurative—as in images evoked by oral recitation or words

evoked by an abstract painting. But Mitchell claims that such distinctions do not remove image from text and vice versa, but in fact are effectively similar to the literal cases:

...there is no need to deny the figurative status of the imagetext, only to dispute the 'merely' that is appended to it. To claim the label only applies metaphorically, notes Nelson Goodman, is not to deny that it has application, only to specify the form of application. Figurative labels ('blue' moods and 'warm' colors) apply as firmly and consistently as literal ones and have as much to do with actual experience. That images, pictures, space, and visuality may only be figuratively conjured up in a verbal discourse does not mean that the conjuring fails to occur or that the reader/listener 'sees' nothing. That verbal discourse may only be figuratively or indirectly evoked in a picture does not mean that the evocation is impotent, that the viewer 'hears' or 'reads' nothing in the image. (*Picture* 95-96)

Ultimately, no image can be isolated in any meaningful way from the influence of text, and vice versa—to do so would be to place each in a vacuum. The very presence of a reader/viewer necessarily prevents the isolation of either image or text; an audience is thus essential for both media. This is not, I should point out, a reader-response issue; for Mitchell's argument, it doesn't matter how an individual or group interprets a text or image, just that they necessarily do so using verbal and/or imagistic heuristics. In this way, I believe consideration of image/text also must include some consideration of audience and the rhetorical nature of the image/text problem, something I will return to below and in Chapter Four, where I will discuss a "rhetoric" of multimodality.

If we accept Mitchell's argument about the composite nature of all media—or at least concede that the relations between text and image are not as clear cut as they are often made out to be—and proceed in such a fashion that this becomes the core assumption, then one potential issue that comes to the fore is not so much "how images and texts are different" but "can we trace the mutual influence of texts and images?"



Perhaps the most pressing issue for this interchapter is how certain discourses on image/text treat the complexity of their core question and, more provocatively, how their core assumptions inform the conclusions they reach. For instance, even though text and image are largely mutually contaminated, why do arguments for or based in some notion of purity persist? Considering this question, or examining the “rhetoric of purity” can open some productive lines of thought into the rhetoric of the study of images (iconology) and, ultimately, to the rhetorical features of discourse in and around a number of thresholds of invisibility.

The “rhetoric of purity” makes up the final point that Mitchell covers in his argument for mixed media. Mitchell argues that discussions of purity, in painting for instance, seem to involve efforts to purge vestiges of the verbal from the image, or to strive to achieve a “pure, silent, illegible visuality” in the visual arts (*Picture 96*). What should be immediately clear is that the arts must strive to accomplish the *goal* of purity—a quality that they seem to lack in the first place. In fact, Mitchell observes that

the purist’s objection to the image/text, and to the heterogeneous picture of representation and discourse it suggests, turns out to be a moral imperative, not an empirical description. It’s not that the claim that all media are mixed-media is imperiously wrong, but that these pictures are bad for us and must be resisted in the name of higher aesthetic values. (96-97)

A “pure” image is not a concept generated by description or categorization—it is not the result of an observed form but the stated goal of a particular ideology, “a complex of desire and fear, power and interest” (Mitchell, *Picture 96*). The purist discussion of the visual, then, begins with a set of ideological values, and its resultant observations generate ideas on what an image *should be* rather than what it *is*—or, if this, too, is too

difficult a quality to identify, then *how an image seems to function*. As such, arguments about and based in the idea of purity—whether of text or image—inevitably misclassify the topic of discourse; images are stripped of their verbal context and content, and texts are isolated from their imagistic qualities both immediate (the visual quality of the page) and evocative (imagery and representation). This, of course, returns us to the problem of value judgment in criticism.

The purist imperative may not be the model for all discourse on image/text, but Mitchell's interrogation of the purity argument is a part of a larger discussion of writing about images—iconology—that exposes a particular leaning, that is, a preference toward the linguistic. Mitchell suggests that the pictorial turn is, itself, not a solution or answer, but a meaningful way of stating the relevant questions about images—indeed, much of the book examines—or exposes—some of the core problems in the discourse on images. One of the major issues, according to Mitchell, is raised in the very word “iconology,” or in its root meanings, as it promises “a discursive science of images, a mastering of the icon by the logos” (*Picture* 24). By Mitchell's account, most approaches to iconology follow through on this premise, or, rather, they attempt to do so. Taking particular issue with Erwin Panofsky's (admittedly groundbreaking) work, Mitchell observes that “Panofsky's is an iconology in which the ‘icon’ is thoroughly absorbed by the ‘logos,’ understood as a rhetorical, literary, or even (less convincingly) a scientific discourse” (*Picture* 28). The core issue is one I've already discussed, reliance on embedded, primarily linguistically privileged values—Mitchell identifies a “romantic hermeneutic”

and “literary/figural basis” for Panofsky’s work (*Picture* 28).<sup>51</sup> This is, of course, evidence of a particularly ideological bent to iconologies in general, part of a “temptation to science” that would establish and maintain just this kind of relation between word and image (Mitchell, *Picture* 30). Mitchell suggests that one possible approach to avoid this kind of ideological problem is to move toward a critical, postmodern iconology more sensitive to the fragmentary, mixed-media view of image/text that he argues for elsewhere in the text:

One thing a critical iconology would surely note is the resistance of the icon to the logos. Indeed, the cliché of postmodernism is that it is an epoch of the absorption of all language into images and ‘simulacra,’ a semiotic hall of mirrors. If traditional iconology repressed the image, postmodern iconology represses language. This is not so much a ‘history’ as a kernel narrative embedded in the very grammar of ‘iconology’ as a fractured concept, a suturing of image and text. (*Picture* 28)

This, of course, is just one of Mitchell’s suggestions, along with giving up the idea of a metalanguage of images altogether, but the core approach is, I think, similar in all of his work— more or less consistently: texts and images need to be examined as forms mutually contaminated by each other, and embedded values dictating the shape of discourse on images and texts must be interrogated.

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<sup>51</sup> I will freely admit that I have only brushed on Panofsky here, and I do not intend to expand on his work in this project. I mention him here only because Mitchell treats him so specifically (and at length in the “Pictorial Turn” chapter of *Picture Theory*). Panofsky’s iconology of “absorption” (Mitchell’s word) is only one example in critical discourse of the word taking a higher place in the hierarchy than the image, and a majority of this dissertation will discuss other examples at length. For the moment, I will say that Mitchell’s critique of Panofsky, which I only gloss here, is useful as a suggested approach, a model not so much in the method and analysis (which I have largely omitted), but in its effort to explore the dynamics of the image/text problem.

In this interchapter, we've seen, at the very least, that the relationship between the two terms—text and image—is more complicated than it may at first appear. The implications of this challenge to the easy characterization are many, and I will discuss some sites of conflict in the next chapter. But I would suggest here that considerations of text and image, or any discussion that somehow explores issues at or around the image/text issue, must stay somewhat attentive to the mutual contamination of the two or risk many of the same pitfalls that Mitchell critiques. Such an approach is perhaps most easily represented in the overview Mitchell provides of his own project in *Iconology*: that he is attempting to offer a “rhetoric of the image,” a study that stays attentive both to

‘what to say about images’ – the tradition of ‘art writing’ that ... [is] essentially concerned with the description and interpretation of visual art; and ... ‘what images say’ – that is, the ways in which they seem to speak for themselves by persuading, telling stories, or describing. (1-2)

Thus, Mitchell speaks to the deep-rooted, mutual influence between text and image, and provides something of a framework, or at least a consideration, for discourse on the image/text issue. While I will not claim that every bit of critical discourse that engages with some combination of text and image must, for instance, cite Mitchell’s work or follow his example, I will argue that such work that doesn’t take a careful stance—if not a full-blown rhetoric—toward image/text risks being undermined by the problems embedded in the relationship of the terms, especially if they unconsciously import particular hierarchies of value embedded in established discourses. In short, critics gesturing to an assured or assumed separation between text and image may encounter similar difficulties to the critics relying on over-simplified narratives of the development

of media, as I discussed in Interchapter Two and Chapter Three. I will examine some of the implications of the text/image problem for critical discourse in Chapter Four.

## **Chapter Four: Affordances and Constraints, Rhetoric and Grammar in Multimodal**

### **Composition**

As I argued in Chapter Three, some of the consequences of the sometimes fractured discourse at a threshold of invisibility include missed opportunities to examine important features of the actual focus of discussion—in that case, video games. Additional complicating factors at such moments include political and institutional considerations: which discipline or department should be studying what, and how might borders be drawn accordingly seem to be valid questions during such discussions (though the appropriateness of the idea of “borders,” not to mention the use of imperialist or colonialist metaphors seems, to me, to be open to serious interrogation). One element that has seen less discussion here—directly, at least—is the practical applications or ramifications of threshold discourse in the classroom. For instance, what influence might the problematic debates about new technologies and media exert on the teaching of various subjects that have some sort of stake in those discursive proceedings? What might the consequences be if a contentious theoretical and political argument, like the narratology versus ludology debate, entered into the classroom? How might the (sometimes problematic) terms of these discussions shape classroom discourse? These are broad, even sweeping questions, but in this final chapter I will examine a particular instance where the *miscommunications* at a threshold of invisibility resulted in the

importation of problematic—even misleading—terms into discussions of new classroom practices. This should serve to demonstrate the importance of examining these discussions both in scholarly debate and in the classroom.

A 2010 exchange between Cynthia Selfe and Doug Hesse in the pages of *College Composition and Communication* underscores some of these important questions being asked in Composition Studies as multimodal composing—that is, composition involving different modes such as text, image, sound, and so on—became a major talking point in the discipline. Many arguments at the time (many of which continue today) held that Composition should expand its practices and focus from a primary emphasis on alphabetic and essayistic literacy—the privileging of writing, and particularly writing instruction in the first year of college—to include composing in different modes. Selfe’s 2009 article, “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing,” had argued for inclusion of aurality in composition pedagogy, primarily as a means to encourage “teachers to develop an increasingly thoughtful understanding of a whole range of modalities and semiotic resources in their assignments and then to provide students the opportunities of developing expertise with *all available means* of persuasion and expression” (“The Movement” 618).

Hesse’s 2010 response seeks to both compliment Selfe’s work and, in his terms, “temper” her claims. Hesse sees two main questions arising from Selfe’s article. First, what is “the curricular space” of composition, “rhetoric/composing” or “writing/composing,” and second, “[w]hose interests should the composition class

serve?” (Hesse 603). For Hesse, these questions have political and ethical components: political in the sense of what institutional and curricular space Composition occupies on college and university campuses, and ethical in the sense of interests served—the interests of the students, employers, the polis, and so on. Selfe, in her response to Hesse, purports to “throw down publicly as an adherent of rhetoric/composing as the more capacious choice” that will respond to the needs of modern “literate citizens” who must make use of “*all* semiotic channels to communicate effectively among different groups and for different purposes” (“Response” 606). Selfe sees the privileging of writing as an overly limited approach to composing, one that will likely “produce citizens with an overly narrow and exclusionary understanding of the world and the variety of audiences who will read and respond to their work,” a possibility that a more expansive, multimodal approach can help avoid (“Response” 606). For Selfe, the work with different modes requires “rhetorically informed activities [that] *are the proper content for composition classes*” (“Response” 607, emphasis in original).

But Selfe’s response speaks only to some of Hesse’s concerns. As I’ve argued in previous chapters—and especially in Chapter Three—these kinds of discussions often have political and institutional dimensions, and here, Selfe offers an expansive answer to Hesse’s first question, but speaks only to curricular focus, not to, as Hesse puts it, “curricular *turf* and institutional sanction” (603, emphasis added). It’s possible that Selfe’s proposal for defining the field as rhetorical in order to accommodate multimodality might encompass the institutional and political dimensions of the issue, but



she does not directly address Hesse's concerns about Composition's location—not to mention sanction—within the academy. There are, in short, a number of factors operative in this discussion, and the different concerns taken up by different participants might indicate a bit of a barrier to communication on the matter.

There is, of course, much more to this rich exchange between Hesse and Selfe, and to the discussions on multimodality in Composition in general (not to mention its ongoing institutional and political concerns), but I want to narrow the focus of analysis in this particular conversation to demonstrate some more directed uses of the threshold of invisibility concept. While previous chapters examined full-fledged academic discussions or debates—on digital photography and video games—as a means to examine the functioning of thresholds of invisibility, this chapter will take a different approach. Here, I suggest a way to apply the threshold of invisibility concept and to demonstrate the potential outcomes—the issues for scholarly rhetorics and practices—of discourse at these moments. As I argued in Chapter One, the threshold of invisibility concept, not unlike stasis theory or Burke's dramatism, seeks to “locate relevant points” to examine and also to discover the appropriate analytical tools to do so. So far, I've examined discussions on a broad scale in order to identify the convergence of, and occasional conflict between, the underlying terministic screens involved in the discourse. This has been done via the elements of discourse I've proposed—*habituation*, *narrativization*, *synchronic/diachronic confusion*, and *barriers to communication*—and the assortment of rhetorical theory I've applied has uncovered some of the dynamics of discussion at these

moments. But, as I've already suggested, I'm also concerned with the *effects* of threshold discourse on resultant scholarly rhetorics and practice. In the case of the narratology versus ludology debate, some of the resultant problems were readily apparent; it became clear that the debate was a distraction from the main focus of inquiry: games themselves. In this chapter, I explore how *terms*, as they become enmeshed in threshold discourse, might be applied, altered, or even distorted, and how they might, in turn, advance, hinder, or distort the interests and focus of a conversation's participants.

Terms often start in different fields and then wind their way into the terministic indeterminacy of a threshold of invisibility, where their meanings and uses are influenced heavily both by their points of origin and contact with different terms and terministic screens. This is most readily apparent in Chapter Three, where the use of terms formed the primary *barrier to communication* at that threshold of invisibility. In tracking the *migration* and *use* of terms, as this chapter does, we can see the effects of threshold discourse on the concepts that are often adopted or imported to new contexts and, perhaps more crucially, we can also point to the outcomes, for better or worse, of these terministic convergences. This chapter, therefore, seeks to explore *what can happen* as a result of threshold discourse, and to thus emphasize the usefulness of examining these kinds of discourses. The difference in approach here might be summarized as moving from a focus on *how* thresholds come about to what they can *do*. This chapter therefore tracks the use of particular terms that seek to establish what might be called—and what Selfe seems to be calling for—a “rhetoric of multimodality.”

To accomplish this, I will focus on specific terms used by both Hesse and Selfe: *affordances* and *constraints*. Hesse groups these terms in with other terms used primarily to consider rhetoric: “Perhaps the best we can do is tour students through the taxonomy of roles, audiences, situations, affordances, constraints, and rhetoricity” (604). These terms make up some of the overall concerns that Hesse raises when he claims “that there are ethical as well as rhetorical dimensions to the affordances and constraints of modes and media, and that education has long tempered ‘what works’ or ‘what’s interesting’ with ‘what should be’” (605). Selfe concurs here, reproducing and agreeing with Hesse’s phrasing (Selfe, “Response” 609), and also making use of *affordances* in her full article as a way to describe “the special capabilities [that different modes] offer to authors” (“The Movement” 643). This is more or less the definition of the term that both critics seem to rely on, and one that might form part of the rhetorical approach that Selfe seems to propose. In general, these two terms have been at the center of a mass of discussions on multimodality and composing—affordance is often taken to mean what you can do with a medium or mode, and constraint is often taken as what you can’t do with a medium or mode. But what these terms mean, how they’re used, and what influence they have on discussions of multimodality in composition is the focus of this chapter.

I will first consider the (relevant) origins and histories of the two terms, *affordance* and *constraint*, with specific emphasis on their use, meanings, and development in a range of disciplinary settings (from perceptual psychology to rhetoric). I will then examine two sites of discourse where the terms enter into the wrangle of a

threshold of invisibility: in related scholarly discourse and in discourse on pedagogical practice. First, the terms can be found in scholarly discussions that attempt to *narrativize* a transition between text and image literacies; this tendency can be found in the work of Gunther Kress and in reactions to his thinking and, interestingly, evokes a number of issues about the image/text problem explored in Interchapter Three. *Affordance*, in particular, enters the discussion as a means for Kress to argue for a narrative of discontinuity between text and image based literacies. The second site for consideration lies in a set of materials primarily designed for pedagogical use, and in particular a collection edited by Selfe that discusses approaches to multimodal forms in the composition classroom. Discussions at this site attempt to formulate an application of the terms *affordances* and *constraints* for use in teaching composing practices for different modes. The teaching materials in this discussion, crucially, are in part influenced by the scholarly discussion of the terms, including Selfe's. A close examination of these sites of discourse speaks to the potential consequences of attempts to formulate a rhetoric of multimodality.

I will suggest that the terms, as they are conceived in other disciplines, are intended as generative, open-ended terms, as a way of thinking through how to deal with modes, media, and technologies that may not usually find a happy home in compositional practice emphasizing writing. They seem to evoke a rhetoric, in the sense following Mitchell's approach to images: a look at what multimodal forms *say* and *what we say about them*. This is, broadly speaking, the way I understand Selfe's undertaking, or

selecting *rhetoric* as the key or guiding term for composition. But at the sites of discourse I examine here, the terms, rather than opening up discussion, may end up closing it down; they may prescribe ideas or methods rather than providing an opportunity to expand the range of possibilities that Selfe and others see in multimodal composing. In short, *affordances* and *constraints* may constitute a prescriptive *grammar* of multimodality rather than a generative *rhetoric*.<sup>52</sup> In the sections that follow, I will explore the origins and history of the two terms in order to demonstrate their use and value before their introduction into discussions on multimodal composing. I do not claim that this is a complete or exhaustive exploration of all uses of these terms. Instead, I will focus my attention on the appearances of the two terms that seem to have both influenced discussions of multimodal composing and might be taken as a basis for a *rhetoric* of multimodality.

### **Origins and Early Use of the Terms**

While it is often difficult to trace the origins of terms—a reality that leads perhaps too often to naval terminology—in the case of *affordance* we are fortunate. The term originates in the work of perceptual and ecological psychologist James J. Gibson. “The verb *to afford* is found in the dictionary, but the noun *affordance* is not,” says Gibson, because “I have made it up” (*The Ecological* 127).<sup>53</sup> The term was coined in Gibson’s

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<sup>52</sup> I see the difference as similar to Zeno’s comparison between rhetoric—an open hand—and logic—a closed fist.

<sup>53</sup> For the record, “affordance” now appears in the Oxford English Dictionary. In fact, it may have resided there long before Gibson coined the term in 1966. The first definition, dating to 1879, points to regional

1966 book *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, expanded on in a 1977 essay, appropriately titled “The Theory of Affordances,” and then further elaborated in a 1979 book, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Gibson’s first use of the term is as a “substitute for *values*, a term which carries an old burden of philosophical meaning” (*The Senses* 285). The term is rooted in the relationship between an animal and environment: “*the affordance of anything is a specific combination of the properties of its substance and its surfaces taken with reference to an animal*” (“The Theory” 67). For instance, flat, firm surfaces afford standing on for animals with legs, sturdy enough objects at approximately knee height afford sitting on for humans, water or other fluids afford floating, swimming, even ingesting (in various ways, depending on the animal). Of course, water also affords drowning; what is afforded to the animal is not always beneficial, some can be “injurious,” a quality I will discuss below.

For Gibson, affordances provide a new way of looking at objects and surfaces in the environment. Affordances, on the one hand, are made up of “physical properties of the environment”—flat, firm, and unobstructed surfaces—but affordances are also always

uniquely suited to a given animal – to his nutritive system or his action system or his locomotor system. A substance is chemically valuable relative to a given nutritive system, herbivorous or carnivorous. An object is valuable relative to a given action system, one with claws or another with hands. A surface layout has locomotor value relative to the kind of legs and feet the animal possesses. (“The Theory” 79)

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usage, namely in Cumberland, as “the ability to bear some expense” (“Affordance”). The second definition originates with Gibson.

Importantly, animals are more likely to perceive affordances—the invariant combination of properties—than they are the individual properties that make up the perceived affordance (“The Theory” 67). For instance, “[i]f an object that rests on the ground has a surface that is itself sufficiently rigid, level, flat, and extended, *and if this surface is raised approximately at the height of the knees of the human biped*, then it affords *sitting-on*” (“The Theory” 68). The properties—rigid, level, flat, extended, at knee level—are likely not perceived individually or in isolation, but rather “combine to yield a higher-order property for the human observer” (“The Theory” 68). The *affordance*, then, of “sit-on-able,” a (higher-order) property derived from the combination of other properties is what is noticeable initially, but, crucially, only to the *human* animal.

The necessary relation between environment and animal, however, is where the complexity—and potential elusiveness—of Gibson’s term becomes (relatively) clear: an affordance is neither an objective quality of the object nor a subjective experience of the animal—or, as Gibson states, “it is both, if you like” (*The Ecological* 129). “An affordance cuts across the economy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer” (Gibson, *The Ecological* 129). In this way, Gibson works against both physics and philosophy, especially “the philosophical muddle of assuming fixed classes of objects” (*The Ecological* 134). The idea of the affordance is not fixed in that objective sense, though it is fairly consistent—affordances don’t change with the needs or

wants of the observer or animal (“The Theory” 78). However, the animal, and particularly humans, can change the affordances of the environment through manipulation (manufacturing, landscaping, etc.) (*The Ecological* 130).

Construction, manufacturing, paving, and so on are examples of changes in affordance that hint at limits—affordances are not unlimited or indicative of boundless potential. Many of them, in fact, can be classified as negative. For Gibson, “affordances of the environment are what it offers animals, what it provides or furnishes, for good or ill” (“The Theory” 68). But good or ill, or beneficial and injurious are, as Gibson claims, “slippery terms that should only be used with great care” (*The Ecological* 137). Gibson counters this by tying these qualities to behavioral and biological factors. Many things afford ingestion, for instance, but are nevertheless poisonous to a particular digestive tract—people can certainly eat (or drink) hemlock, for instance, but that affordance is a negative one. Behaviorally, it’s worth noting that the affordances of other humans include “the whole range of social significance” (“The Theory” 68). This encompasses both affectionate and violent interactions.

Finally, it’s worth mentioning that Gibson does, as I mentioned above, acknowledge limitations: the issue of ecological niches addresses this matter. But Gibson does not use the term *constraint*. Certain aspects of the environment do limit what animals can do, through positive and negative affordances, in part. Gibson goes so far as to say that that the environment can “constrain” what the animal can do, including what



humans can do to change or manipulate their environment (*The Ecological* 143), but there is no formal second term, no *constraint* to balance *affordance*.

In sum, *affordances* for Gibson are what the environment provides for an animal. The relationship between animal and object is key, as affordances only exist within the relationship. Affordances are neither objective qualities nor subjective impressions, but a combination of properties of an object that can engage with attributes of the animal—affordances point both ways, they don't exist without object or animal. There are also positive and negative affordances, and while the negative affordances can cause harm, they are not treated, for Gibson, as what we would usually view as constraints. The environment does constrain what animals can do—there are always limitations—but this is not a focal point in Gibson's work.

I've now dedicated more space to discussion of Gibson's original term than most critics who actually make use of it.<sup>54</sup> While I certainly don't think that critics making use of terms should always offer multiple page, extended definitions of those terms, there is, as we will see below, some call in this case to consider the complexity of the term and its uses. This sets up an interesting problem. The term is likely more complex than it is given credit for, and many of the permutations of its usage don't necessarily account for this complexity. By the same token, the real range of those permutations, how much they

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<sup>54</sup> In fact, Gibson is rarely mentioned at all in later discussions. Donald A. Norman and Ann Wysocki, both of whom I will discuss below, credit Gibson with coining the term, but both carry some interesting caveats to their use. Norman's use of affordance, by his own admission, comes out of discussions (or arguments) with Gibson but also works against Gibson's usage (Norman, "Affordance, Conventions" 39). Wysocki questions whether the "slipperiness" of *affordance* actually extends the taxonomic problems that it purports to "fix" (60).

borrow from the original concept and how much they change it, may not be as readily apparent without this extended focus. Remembering Gibson's ideas will be useful going forward.

While *affordance* is a relative neologism, *constraint* has a longer history, but one that is broader in terms of use. As a result, the origins of the term—and much of its usage—are not quite as essential to this conversation; the obsolete usages such as “force of arms” and “a cause or occasion of affliction” are, obviously, less useful here (“Constraint”). The more general definition, where some force is exerted to “determine or confine action,” or where some “[c]ompulsion [is] put upon the expression of feelings or the behaviour” are more in line with the use of the term in this discussion (“Constraint”). Perhaps an appropriate starting point for constraint, as used in terms of rhetoric, would be Lloyd Bitzer's canonical essay on the Rhetorical Situation. The features of Bitzer's work don't need extensive elaboration here, but it is worth discussing his use of the term constraint (along with audience and exigence) as a key feature of any rhetorical situation. For Bitzer, “every rhetorical situation contains a set of *constraints* made up of persons, events, objects, and relations which are part of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (8). Since Bitzer's main focus is the possibility to influence change—this is what the rhetor argues for as a result of the situation—constraints delineate the limits of possibility. The constraints generally include

beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives, and the like; and when the orator enters the situation, his discourse not only harnesses

constraints given by the situation but provides additional important constraints—for example his personal character, his logical proofs, and his style. (Bitzer 8)

Notably, constraints for Bitzer are located both in the rhetor's choices and in the situation itself—these are connected to Aristotle's artistic and inartistic proofs, respectively (8).

Interestingly, the term “constraint” in Bitzer's usage does not seem to flourish in rhetorical thought and scholarship. “Situation” certainly does, along with its features—though constraints are not always mentioned in summaries of Bitzer's model. Elements of Bitzer's constraints seem to be recognizable in discussions of, say, the expectations of different discourse communities, and in particular academic discourse communities.

There are also some similarities in genre conventions. Bitzer's categorization of constraints as in line with Aristotle's artistic and inartistic proofs may also have subordinated the term. Then again, Bitzer's discussion of the concept is not particularly prominent in his text—it makes up a moderate sized paragraph. Still, when this concept is discussed in connection to rhetoric, Bitzer's usage is the prime example, often the only example.

As should be immediately clear, my discussion of *constraint* here is quite brief. This stems primarily from the fact that the term is used more commonly in public discourse than *affordance*, and, perhaps, also from the differences in how it is used in the conversation on multimodality. In short, *constraint* does not have the same kind of curious backstory as *affordance*, and it is not a term borrowed in isolation to make sense of something new. At times, *affordance* is used without being paired with *constraint* (Selfe, in fact, focused primarily on *affordance*). Instead, *constraint* seems to accrue

stipulative definitions as it is used in discussion, and in conjunction with *affordance*. In fact, it is the association of the two terms, as used to describe qualities in design and later in multimodal composing, that seems to lend *constraint* its particular character in this discussion. Given the discussion of Burke's associational clusters elsewhere in this dissertation, this should come as no surprise, but it demonstrates the kind of terministic dynamics that take place in discourse at a threshold of invisibility. In the next section, I explore the development of the two terms as they are deployed together—primarily in discussions of design—which eventually leads to their use in discussions on multimodality in composition.

### **Development and Use of the Terms in Conjunction**

The two terms seem to take a step toward their later use in Composition when they are brought together in discussions of design principles. *Affordances* and *constraints* become key pieces of Donald A. Norman's influential text on design, *The Design of Everyday Things* (1989), which was, curiously, originally published under the title *The Psychology of Everyday Things* (1988). Norman's ideas on design seem to launch these two terms into the lexicon of several disciplines, including design, computer engineering, and, later, Composition.

Like Gibson, Norman's text is grounded in psychology. Norman's interest is primarily in human error, and his main focus, design, takes cues from his interest in understanding and preventing human error. For Norman, human error is most often

caused by faulty design; the designer is at fault, not the user (*The Design* x).<sup>55</sup> With this in mind, Norman proposes some key features of effective, thoughtful design, and the key terms are included. In Norman's scheme, the most important elements to consider in thoughtful design are conceptual models, feedback, constraints, and affordances. For Norman, design is an act of communication between designer and user, but the sum of the communication must reside in the device itself (*The Design* xi). Thus, the conceptual model, or the perceived effect of a user action with regard to the function of a device, is of prime importance, as is feedback, or a sense of what our actions have accomplished.

As for *affordances* and *constraints*, Norman offers both terms as key components in effective communication by design. The general premise of *affordance* is similar here, but Norman's take is a bit more tangible, or perhaps practical—he doesn't include the philosophical angle that is so important for Gibson. Instead, Norman contends that affordances result from “the mental interpretation of things, based on our past knowledge and experience applied to our perception of the things about us” (*The Design* 219n). Norman claims that his view is “in conflict” with many Gibsonian psychologists, but refrains from delving into that particular “internal debate within modern psychology,” as it lacks relevance to his current project (*The Design* 219n).

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<sup>55</sup> Norman calls himself out on this count in regards to the original title of his book. With “psychology” in the title, the text was rarely placed in stores with other books on design. This could probably be considered a rhetorical choice, but for Norman it falls under the category of design. It's worth mentioning, of course, that academics loved the word play in the original title (the acronym is POET), but the business community (and the publishers) preferred the later title (Norman, *The Design* ix-x).

In practice, Norman's *affordances* refer "to the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used" (*The Design* 9). *Affordances*, here, are part of the communicative act of the designer:

Affordances provide strong clues to the operations of things. Plates are for pushing. Knobs are for turning. Slots are for inserting things into. Balls are for throwing or bouncing. When affordances are taken advantage of, the user knows what to do just by looking: no picture, label, or instruction is required. Complex things may require explanation, but simple things should not. When simple things need pictures, labels, or instructions, the design has failed. (Norman, *The Design* 9)

Crucially, however, affordances themselves are not necessarily under the designer's purview—it's not possible to "add an affordance," for instance, which is an issue I will discuss below.

For Norman, *affordances* speak to the possibilities of designed object and indicate how we may use it, what parts are moving or fixed, whether we push or pull, or so on (*The Design* 82). But unlike Gibson and others, Norman also sees possibility in limitations, which is where *constraints* enter the conversation. Norman's *constraints* limit the alternative uses of an object and help to direct the user toward the "proper course of action, even in a novel situation" (*The Design* 82). Arguably, *constraints* make up the more powerful idea, at least for the designer; the comparative weight of discussion in Norman's text leans towards constraints as the more prominent tool in the designer's belt. Norman categorizes everyday constraints into four groups: physical, semantic, cultural, and logical. There are also natural constraints, which I'll discuss separately.

To explore each category of constraints at length, Norman refers to a well-designed Lego set, which, when assembled correctly, creates a (toy) man on a (toy) motorcycle. He begins with physical limitations, which

constrain possible operations. Thus, a large peg cannot fit into a small hole. ... with the proper use of physical constraints [in design] there should be only a limited number of possible actions – or, at least, desired actions can be made obvious, usually by being especially salient. (Norman, *The Design* 84)

Thus, the Lego pieces can only fit together in certain ways. “Semantic constraints,” on the other hand, “rely upon the meaning of the situation to control the set of possible actions... Semantic constraints rely upon our knowledge of the situation and of the world. Such knowledge can be a powerful and important clue” (Norman, *The Design* 85). In the case of the Lego motorcycle, the windshield goes on the front, and the rider sits facing forward. For Norman, cultural constraints often have to do convention: red lights are generally brake lights on the rear of a vehicle and white or yellow lights go on the front, so that’s where those particular Lego pieces need to be attached (*The Design* 85). Finally, a logical constraint dictates that all the pieces should be used, so any remaining pieces can be placed on the motorcycle through process of elimination (Norman, *The Design* 86).

While I think that Norman’s categories might overlap a bit, the fact that he goes to such length to explore *constraints* underscores an important part of his design philosophy: *constraints* can be added, programmed in, built upon to make effective designs. *Constraints* are things that designers can use: objects can be designed so that they only fit together in certain ways, doors can be designed that prevent users from

pushing instead of pulling, and so on. *Affordances* are still important, and Norman suggests that they be made visible, but *constraints* can be added by the designer.

Ultimately, Norman instructs designers to take advantage of affordances, to make them visible, and to build in or add constraints, all in order to make the correct action—the right action—the most obvious and necessary action for the user.

There are, however, a couple of issues with Norman's terminology. Since the realm of constraints gets a bit more attention, it's more adequately explained. And in one case, the natural constraint, there is some overlap with affordance:

3. *Natural constraints are present.* The world restricts the allowed behavior. The physical properties of objects constrain possible operations: the order in which parts can go together and the ways in which an object can be moved, picked up, or otherwise manipulated. Each object has physical features – projections, depressions, screw threads, appendages – that limit its relationships to other objects, operations that can be performed to it, what can be attached to it, and so on. (Norman, *The Design* 55)

The general definition of *affordance*, as I've discussed, encompasses both the positive and the negative—the possibilities and the limitations of objects. Gibson, for instance, suggests that the environment can limit what an animal can do through negative affordances. Norman, however, separates out the limitations of objects and places them under the *constraints* category. This begins, I think, an interesting trend toward identifying the terms with positive and negative connotations. However, while “limitations” and “constraints” more generally have, in many ways, negative connotations, for Norman these ideas are arguably the most important in “proper” or “good” design, as they can be actively cultivated, can be added, to the design of a device to achieve the intended outcome. Norman encourages designers to “[u]se constraints so



that the user feels as if there is only one possible thing to do – the right thing, of course" (*The Design* 199). Norman's design goals, then, rely heavily on the idea of the constraint.

But despite the *constraints* being more in the designer's control, it's the idea of *affordance* that takes off. Norman was pleased about this—in the preface to the 2002 edition of *The Design of Everyday Things* he mentions that the idea has become “immensely popular” (xii). But that popularity also resulted in considerable misuse of the term. In his 1999 article, “Affordance, Conventions, and Design,” Norman decries the common use of *affordance* as something that can be added to a design by a designer. The problem, Norman found, was that designers were confusing real and perceived affordances. The difference is important for all design, but is made particularly interesting by the large role that computer designing programs play in the profession.

Norman's clarification of the two concepts uses computers as a touchstone:

Although all screens within reaching distance afford touching, only some can detect the touch and respond to it. Thus, if the display does not have a touch-sensitive screen, the screen still affords touching, but it has no effect on the computer system...designers sometimes will say that when they put an icon, cursor, or other target on the screen, they have added an “affordance” to the system. This is a misuse of the concept. The affordance exists independently of what is visible on the screen. Those displays are not affordances; they are visual feedback that advertise the affordances: they are the perceived affordances. (“Affordance, Convention” 39, 40)

To extend the idea, Norman points out that, while any area of the computer screen “affords” clicking—provided a mouse is attached—only particular points with symbolic communications, visual information that has meaning due to cultural convention, actually *do* something when clicked on. The shape of the cursor and particular icons on the digital desktop are conventional, or more to the point, are *constraints*. Much of the misuse of the

term affordances actually addresses constraints, and primarily cultural ones (Norman, “Affordance, Convention” 40).

This confusion is notable. Already we’ve seen the permeability of the two main terms, affordances and constraints. On the one hand, affordance has encompassed both, as it includes both possibilities and limitations. On the other, constraints, in Norman’s formulation (and even in Bitzer’s), are separate entities that are, crucially, both conventional in culture *and* partially under the control of the designer or the rhetor. If Norman’s text, his usage of terms, are actually as widespread or dominant as they seem (or as he seems to suggest), then constraints should be the dominant term. Norman claims that if his book is successful, then the reader should *see* the world in a different way, will notice affordances, constraints, and think about conceptual models for the objects that he or she interacts with (*The Design* xii). Norman wants his readers to see the world in his terms, or through his terministic screen. Interestingly, the terms that are picked up, as his later article indicates, are not quite the terms he intended. For better or worse, *affordance* becomes dominant, and Norman seems to admit as much.

And that dominance is reflected, in part, in discussions using *affordances* and *constraints* as part of a project to conceptualize literacy, rhetoric, and composition in regards to multiple modes: *affordance* seems to be the term adopted most often, but *constraint*, as Norman suggests, may actually be the more important of the two. In the next two sections, I examine what might be called “problem sites” of discussion on multimodality: scholarly discourse and materials aimed at pedagogical practice.

## **Narrativizations: The Terms in Scholarly Discourse on Rhetoric and Composition**

At the first so-called problem site of discussion on multimodality, the use of the terms in scholarly discourse, we return to a familiar issue: the narrativization of a particular moment of change. At this particular site, *affordance* enters into a perspective favoring discontinuity, or a narrative that posits imagistic literacy as both distinct from alphabetic literacy and as its replacement in prominent use in communication. This particular perspective is most noticeable in the work of Gunther Kress. Kress, whose primary focus is on semiotics, suggests design as one of the key terms for thinking about communication and meaning. But *affordances* for Kress don't necessarily deal with the possibilities connected to physical objects, which is Norman's primary concern, but with the possibilities and limitations of modes and media, and more importantly, how meaning is made through them.<sup>56</sup>

Kress frames his work in terms we can recognize as favoring discontinuity, evoking some of the feel of the “digital revolution” views on photography I discussed in Chapter Two. Kress calls his 2003 text *Literacy in the New Media Age* a “book ... about alphabetic writing,” albeit one that appears “at a moment in the long history of writing

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<sup>56</sup> There are some caveats on my treatment of Kress that should be mentioned here. Kress is a prolific scholar and commentator on design, literacy, and semiotics (and a great many other concepts), and it would be a daunting challenge to do justice to the entire scope of his work that has, so far, spanned dozens of publications and over twenty years. As such, my focus on Kress is somewhat selective; I primarily discuss Kress' 2003 book *Literacy in the New Media Age* and his 2004 *Computers and Composition* article “Gains and Losses: New Forms of Texts, Knowledge, and Learning” (I also mention his 2010 book *Multimodality* in a footnote below). This provides a view speaks to some of the main issues in Kress' work, even if it does not capture the full breadth of his thinking. My focus, of course, remains on the key terms *affordance* and *constraint*, and these texts also provide some insight into how Kress makes use of those terms and to what end.

when four momentous changes are taking place simultaneously: social, economic, communicational and technological change” (*Literacy* 9). There are strands of thought here that are by now familiar, as the “combined effects” of the four kinds of changes “are so profound that it is justifiable to speak of a revolution in the landscape of communication; this revolution is producing far-reaching effects in the uses, functions, forms and valuations of alphabetic writing” (Kress, *Literacy* 9). For Kress, the revolution highlights, or is embodied by, the shift from writing to image, from the mode of writing in the medium of the book to the mode of image in the medium of the screen.

This transition—from writing/book to image/screen necessitates a reassessment of how meaning is made, and an identification of the means of meaning making in multiple modes. Here, *affordance* enters the conversation as a crucial element in Kress’ arguments for discontinuity. The task at hand requires “finding principles that will show the “affordances”, distinct potentials and limitations for representation of the various modes” (“Gains” 12). Here, affordance once again encompasses both possibility and limitation. In addition, Kress uses the term “logic” to describe differences in organization, or the possibilities of the two main “logics,” the sequential and the spatial, that make up the core distinction between dominant modes. Logic is used in close proximity to affordance in much of Kress’ work, and, at times, he appears to use the terms interchangeably.

*Affordances* and the governing logics of modes lie at the center of the changing communicational landscape in which Kress is interested. He describes the shift from the

dominance of writing to the dominance of image in terms of the distinct logics of the two modes:

The two modes of writing and of image are each governed by distinct logics, and have distinctly different affordances. The organization of writing – still leaning on the logics of speech – is governed by the logic of time, and by the logic of sequence of its elements in time, and temporally governed arrangements. The organization of the image, by contrast, is governed by the logic of space, and by the logic of simultaneity of its visual/depicted elements in spatially organized arrangements. (*Literacy* 1-2)

The difference in modes—that is, the difference in the distinct logics of modes—makes up the core element of meaning making in those modes. Simply put, writing is sequential and relies on that “logic of sequence” to make meaning. Images, on the other hand, exist primarily in space, and rely on a spatial logic for meaning. Crucially, though, these are *distinctly different affordances*; sequence and space are separate, distinct, even unrelated. A blunt paraphrase of Kress’ thinking here might result in the simple statements “writing can do sequential reasoning; images can do spatial representation.” As we’ve already seen in Interchapter Three, drawing this kind of distinction between text and image can be problematic, an issue I will discuss below, but for Kress, the contrast between modes is part of a claim for discontinuity that includes his revolutionary rhetoric and the apparent target for revolutionary overthrow, the hegemony of text (specifically writing). Essentially, Kress builds *affordance* (and the distinctions the term allows him to draw) into a critique of power.

The sequential logic of the mode of writing, paired with the medium of the book, has been, for Kress, the dominant force in meaning making until recently. The sequence has a single entry point and a single exit point, and this path is controlled by the author;

“readers are dependent—at least in their initial hearing and reading—on sequence and on sequential uncovering. It is the author’s order...that dominates” (*Literacy* 13). Of course, the adherents of the sequential mode are made up of the older generation and the established elites, who have a vested interest in resisting any change (*Literacy* 6, “Gains” 18). In this case, logocentrism—an idea discussed in Interchapter Three—is not merely a *preference* for the logos over the icon, to borrow W.J.T. Mitchell’s phrasing, but an instrument of power, a means of control.

To counter the hegemony of the sequence, Kress suggests that the younger generations are more invested in the logic of space. Images have various entry points, and while there are some positions within an image with more prominence than others, the “reading path” of the image is “(relatively) open” (*Literacy* 4). Furthermore, the differences in affordance are distinct, again, in terms of meaning. Kress suggests that words can be used even if the user doesn’t know the meaning, as words are “empty of meaning, or perhaps better, the word as sound-shape or as letter-shape gives no indication of its meaning, it is there to be filled with meaning” (*Literacy* 3). Since we fill words with meaning, we can encounter issues when *our* meaning doesn’t match with others, as when we read—and enjoy—a novel (having filled its words with “our” meaning) “only to be utterly disappointed or worse when we see it as a film, where some others have filled the words with their very different meanings” (*Literacy* 3). This quality of meaning in words differs strongly with meaning in images. While words are empty of meaning and must be filled, images are already filled with meaning; a strict order of words is required, along

with interpretation of the reader, to make meaning, but images contain “no vagueness, no emptiness,” they are full elements, even though they still bow to the logic of space (Kress, *Literacy* 4).

There is, of course, a distinctly liberatory feel to Kress’ argument: in slightly exaggerated terms, writing is bondage and image is freedom. There are, once again, some shades of “techno-euphoria” that marked discussions of digital photography. The implications for multimodal composition hint at a similarly inflected opening of the possibilities of expression. With images,

that which I wish to depict I can depict...I can draw whatever I like whenever I like to draw it. Unlike words, depictions are full of meaning; they are always specific. So on the one hand there is a finite stock of words—vague, general, nearly empty of meaning; on the other hand there is an infinitely large potential of depictions—precise, specific, and full of meaning. (“Gains” 15)

Here, again, there are some problems in Kress’ assertions to be addressed below, but the implications for the term *affordance* and its use are twofold.

First, and moving away from Norman’s usage of both *affordance* and *constraint*, Kress seems to combine possibility and limitation back into the single term *affordance*. When Kress asks, semi-rhetorically, “What are the *affordances* of a mode?” he also asks a cluster of associated questions, such as “what can a specific mode do?” and “What are its limitations and potentials?” (*Literacy* 46). Kress, in this way, addresses the “*materiality*” (which we might consider another term in a cluster with *affordance*, *logic*, and so on) of modes, which “holds specific potentials for representation, and at the same time brings certain limitations” (*Literacy* 46). The second implication for *affordance* seems to arise, in part, from the first, in that the potential and limitations that make up

*affordances* are used to distinguish modes, to keep them distinct. For instance, sequence and space are separate logics with different affordances, and their constituent modes—writing and images, respectively—seem just as separate.<sup>57</sup>

Kress' use of *affordance* does not seem to be out of keeping with the general use of the term by both Gibson and Norman. But his deployment of *affordance* in the argument for discontinuity raises some important problems, especially given the heavy emphasis on writing and image being thoroughly distinct from one another. And critiques of Kress are not insensitive to some of these issues. Paul Prior, while agreeing with Kress' program of theorizing changing communicational practices, points out some problematic assertions in Kress' work. Prior addresses Kress' use of a hard distinction between the book and the screen, observing that texts have, in fact, rarely been the purely linear and sequential entities that Kress proposes. More to the point, however, is Prior's critique of Kress' hard distinction between writing and image. Contrasting Kress's use of affordance with Gibson's, Prior notes that

Kress...proposes a set of hard binary distinctions between words and images. Words in his account are finite, sequential, vague, conventional, authored,

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<sup>57</sup> In some of Kress' later work, most notably his 2010 book *Multimodality*, he firmly posits design as the guiding paradigm for composing, and suggests a "social" dimension to the semiotics of contemporary communication. This renders the term *affordance* even more fluid, as it takes on a "participatory" dimension that "blur[s] former distinctions of *production* and *consumption*, of *writing* and *reading*" (*Multimodality* 144). Kress also suggests that and both affordances and modes can be altered by social practice—not all affordances are used, or even recognized, by a given culture (*Multimodality* 82). On the one hand, the social dimension might address some of the more problematic elements of his text/image dichotomy, but the "blurring" of distinctions between production and consumption, between reading writing, might also evoke—and perhaps problematically so—the kinds of blurring or "erosion" between amateur and professional in photography (see Chapter Two) or between producer and consumer as Jenkins sees the issue in *Convergence Culture* (see Chapter Three). This element of Kress' work is important, but falls a bit outside the timeline of development of the *affordance* and *constraint* terms I examine in this chapter.



narrative and/or causal, and open to critique. Images are infinite, spatial, specific, natural and transparent, viewed, and available only for design. (26)

The chief issue, as Prior sees it, that Kress's binary "can only be sustained by sharply limiting the genres and/or texts sampled" to a few "prototypical" objects (26).

Furthermore, dividing literacy so distinctly leads, in Prior's view, to a form of periodization, an approach that "must erase (or discount) social and communicative hybridity to produce an image of homogeneity and, thus, tends to overdetermine modes of communication and their consequences around a small set of prototypical objects and scenes" (26). In other words, Kress' narrativization of this particular "revolution" leads to a *re-narrativization*, one that ignores the complexity of the image/text issue. For Prior, word and image are by no means so neatly distinct; there are plenty of "hybrids" and other "mixed" modes, which is a view that dovetails with the considerable tradition of complicating the image/text dichotomy.

As I discussed in Interchapter Three, the "text/image problem" is long-standing and complex, and there is a considerable weight of critical discourse that suggests, at the very least, that neat distinctions between image and text are never quite so neat as they seem. While Kress' argument that image is superseding writing seems to evoke some of the push-pull, the contentious relation between icon and logos that Mitchell discusses, but it doesn't speak to the constant dialectic of the two, the "fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself" (*Iconology* 34). The only variation in this view is "the precise nature of the weave," or which one seems more dominant; Mitchell even goes so far as to claim that "the history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for

dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs” (*Iconology* 43). Kress’ “revolution” seems to suggest a novel turn in this struggle, and even evokes the kind of cultural and political tensions that Mitchell identifies in the text/image problem. Kress actually reverses the normal hierarchy, as he seems to celebrate the icon over the logos, but by separating image and writing and almost claiming that the former will replace the latter, Kress leaves the dialectic behind, which might misrepresent their long-standing relationship.

Isolating writing and image, as Kress does, seems to constitute *essential* separation of the two, and it evokes, even more forcefully, the sort of “rhetoric of purity” that takes, as its premise, the need to “purify” the two modes of the semblances of the other. Kress’ “distinct affordances” of text and image promise, even propose, a view similar to the pure image or pure text ideals that Mitchell critiques as little more than utopian ideals argued for by adherents to particular schools of artistic thought (*Picture* 96-97). To see image and text as truly distinct, or as “pure,” is, as discussed in Interchapter Three, to strip both of their context. Further, the kind of mutual “contamination” of image and text spoken to by both Mitchell and Shohat and Stam seems to enter into the equation at the very level that Kress draws distinctions: at the level of meaning. For Mitchell, “the image/text problem” is not “between” different arts but “within” them; “all arts are ‘composite’ arts (both text and image); all media are mixed-media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes” (*Picture* 94-95). This is almost a direct challenge to Kress’ assertion

that images are, as is, “precise, specific, and full of meaning” (“Gains” 15). As seen elsewhere in this dissertation, there is a tremendous weight of critical thought that works *against* this sort of view of visual meaning as autonomous or isolated, from the postmodern view of photographic meaning as situated in context to Shohat and Stam’s assertions that the visual is “imbricated in whole series of apparatuses – the museum, the Academy, the art world, the publishing industry, even the nation state” (55). To draw an absolute distinction between modes as Kress does might overlook the influence of the variety of meaning-making elements Mitchell, Shohat and Stam, and other thinkers suggests here, and might also evoke the formalist essentialism view of photography—where meaning is located purely in the capturing of objective reality—or of the “game essentialism” of the ludologists—as when Aarseth argued that games were not, at all, intertextual (“Genre” 48). At the very least, the attempt to “fix” meaning, especially by means of the idea of *affordances*, might be a problematic gesture.

And this is another critique of Kress’ thinking, one taken up by Ann Wysocki, who criticizes Kress’ dichotomy and even the use of the term *affordance*. For Wysocki, the problem with *affordance* is that it tries to “fix” with some finality “what the things of our world are capable of doing as we use them within the complex contexts in which we live” (60n). Not unlike Norman, Wysocki suggests the use of *constraint* or even *convention* in order to “hold onto the messiness of how we live with things that both resist and work with us and to hold on, therefore, to considering our communication materials as things whose possibilities we should be trying to open and understand rather

than fix” (60*n*). Dividing modalities as Kress suggests might isolate those modes from each other. According to Wysocki, we should acknowledge the visual components of the page—how text is arranged, for instance—as well as the textual (58). This moves to provide what I have been calling a rhetoric of multimodality that, in keeping with Selfe, offers up all the available means of composing. In Wysocki’s view, this will help students “to question how they have come to understand the spaces of pages so that they can, if need be, use different spaces, potentially powerful spaces that...have been rendered unavailable by naturalized, unquestioned practice” (57). In short, working with and against constraints may be the more beneficial path, one that appears to promise an expansive, rhetorical knowledge of multiple modes.

The potential outcomes for the terms *affordance* and *constraint* at this site, or rather, what can be “taken away” from this particular look at scholarly discourse on those terms, might take two general forms. Kress combines the terms, allowing *affordance* to address both possibility and limitation, which seems to align more with Gibson’s original usage. But Kress also places *affordance* in the service of a problematic narrative of discontinuity, where modes are starkly distinguished from each other based on their *affordances*. This speaks to what might be an unattainable exclusivity between modes that overlooks the considerable overlap between them, especially between text and image. Critiques of Kress, and especially Wysocki’s work, offer a different take on the key terms. Wysocki’s avoidance of *affordance* seems to evoke some of the actual indeterminacy, the “slipperiness” of both the term itself and between modes that Kress’

hard text/image binary seems to overlook. Wysocki even seems to align more with Norman's usage of *convention* and *constraint* as the more rhetorical (or, for Norman, design centered) concepts. And it is Wysocki's emphasis on the importance of these terms in composition—and in the teaching of writing—that seems most in line with the rhetorical approach to multimodality that Selfe supports.

At the very least, these two perspectives speak to a level of complexity in the terms and their use that a rhetoric of multimodality—following Mitchell, *what it says* and *what we say about it*—would need to consider. But as we'll see in the next section, *affordances* and *constraints*, as they are carried forward into discourse on pedagogy (and especially in materials at instructional use) do not seem to retain this sense of complexity. Kress seems to be the more influential voice at the next site of discourse, and the terms themselves might be drained of their productive or generative—rhetorical—use.

### **A Grammar: The Terms in Teaching Guides and Pedagogical Texts**

The second of what I have called “problem sites” for the discussion of the terms *affordance* and *constraint* comes in the form of materials—primarily teaching guides or collections of praxis-focused writings—designed for pedagogical use. This site is of particular importance given the focus of the main discussion, on multimodal composition, and the goals (and concerns) set forth by Selfe, Hesse, Wysocki, and others. In short, an examination of these kinds of texts, ones discussing practice, can demonstrate how the two key terms enter into the classroom space and are applied towards the stated and implied ends of a rhetoric of multimodality. I will not claim that this examination takes in

the full range of this particular discourse—there are, undoubtedly, many more texts with the goal of aiding in pedagogical practice—but the texts selected here speak to the goals that Selfe lays out in her interchange with Hesse and can thus uncover some of the issues that present themselves in this kind of work.

My primary focus for this section, appropriately enough, is Selfe’s edited collection of teaching resources titled *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*.<sup>58</sup> The collection features the key terms in pedagogical action, or at least in suggestions for use in the composition classroom. In their introductory essay, Selfe and Pamela Takayoshi suggest that the collection “provides a basic set of resources for teachers who want to experiment with multimodal composition assignments—particularly those that incorporate video and audio production—in their classrooms” (3). This is, then, a starting point, a way for such teachers to begin experimenting with multimodal composition and to start making a “theoretical shift in their understanding of literacy” from privileging one semiotic channel—writing—to one embracing multiple channels (2-3). It should hardly be surprising that such a starting point would feature, for

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<sup>58</sup> A point of chronology is probably relevant here; *Multimodal Composition* was published in 2007, two years before Selfe’s “The Movement of Air, The Breath of Meaning” (2009) that began her exchange with Hesse (2010), and Selfe even includes a lengthy passage from her introduction, co-authored with Pamela Takayoshi, in the 2009 article. I don’t want to suggest that this prior text is somehow the fruit of Selfe’s goals as laid out in 2010, but rather as the culmination of the “lives” of the two main terms, *affordances* and *constraints*, that I cover here. As I will discuss in the conclusion of this chapter, this discussion—and the use of these terms in these particular teaching materials—do not serve to set the terms in stone or suggest that their usage in Selfe’s edited collection reflects the full range of their possibilities. Instead, this particular text offers a glance at how the terms were, at the time, working their way into discourse on classroom practice and, presumably, classroom practice itself.

the first time in this “history” of terms I’ve presented, an actual *definition* of one of the terms. In Selfe’s text, *affordance* actually appears in a glossary of technical terms:

***Affordances:*** The particular representational capabilities associated with a modality of composing. Video, for instance, is particularly capable of representing movement, process, and the passage of time. Audio has the capability of representing accent, tone of voice, mood, or music. An affordance of alphabetic writing is the ability to represent linear propositional logic in structures like sentences and paragraphs. (Selfe, *Multimodal* 193)

While this definition seems to evoke some of Kress’ view (the capabilities of a mode)—sans the emphasis on stark distinctions between modes—there is a bit of shift. The limitations of mode, which in Kress’ formulation balanced possibilities within the definition of *affordance*, are gone, and, in fact, “possibilities” has been replaced by “capabilities.” There is a fairly strong implication of “what the mode can do” in this definition. Of course, there is another issue worth emphasizing: there isn’t much of an overt mention of rhetor or audience in this definition. In other words, some of Gibson’s insistence that affordances point to the animal and the object may have been lost.

It’s also notable, however, that this particular definition is not a constant throughout Selfe’s edited collection. Takayoshi and Selfe’s introductory chapter reintroduces constraints, thus separating capability and limitation into different terms once again. In addition, audio becomes a key component in this thinking, as opposed to Kress’ dichotomous treatment of writing and image. This allows students to work through a number of issues with different modes:

[A]s students work within the rhetorical constraints of such an audio assignment, they learn more about the particular affordances of sound (the ability to convey accent, emotion, music, ambient sounds that characterize a particular location or event) and the constraints of sound (the difficulty of going back to review

complex or difficult passages, to convey change not marked by sound, to communicate some organizational markers like paragraphs). Importantly, students also gain the chance to compare the affordances and constraints of audio with those of alphabetic writing—and, thus, improve their ability to make *informed and conscious choices* about the most effective modality for communicating in particular rhetorical contexts. (Takayoshi and Selfe 9)

This view seems to take on the “what the mode can and can’t do” view of affordances and constraints. In practical terms, *affordance* and *constraint* are defined here in a way that doesn’t seem to run counter to previous usage. What’s notable, however, is the mix of *qualities* that make up some affordances: sentences and paragraphs are an affordance of writing, one constraint of audio is its lack of paragraphs; accent, emotion, and music are balanced by the technical aspects of recording: its sequential playback. On the surface here, affordance seems to include both technical attributes—qualities of the medium—and meaning-making. It might even conflate the two.

This is not necessarily a problem, or beyond the scope of what the terms can likely accommodate, but the proximity of technical properties—and what Gibson would probably call values, or “subjective elements”—might cause issues for the use of the term affordance (and constraint, for that matter) in practical application, that is, as a means to offer parameters or guidelines for student work. In Mickey Hess’s chapter in the same text, this potential issue is highlighted. For Hess, multimodality is about the expansion of composing practices, to underscore the complexity of composition and ask students to reflect on both process and product (29). At issue here are what might be reasonably called the *constraints* (though Hess is sparing with that term) of conventional practice in essay composing. For Hess, “students and teachers may find that multimodal



compositions provide interesting ways to re-think more formulaic approaches to composing – what to do and what not to do when they write a paper” (31). Given Selfe and Takayoshi’s suggestion that comparing affordances can be productive, this seems reasonable. Here, “prior experience” and “habitual approaches to composing alphabetic essays” are issues for both teacher and student; but multimodal composing offers the opportunity to break from such “sedimented habits,” as teachers and students are unlikely to have had as much experience with video or audio (31). This, too, seems reasonable enough.

But the real issue with Hess’s text is that technical capabilities—real affordances—are equated to conventional representational practices. This is most obvious in a chart in Hess’s text. His affordances for composing for audio appear, in that chart, as follows:

Projects dealing with music, dialect, and accent, or sonic environments are particularly well-suited for the affordances of sound. The absence of visual print or images makes us hear essays differently and focus on the experience of listening... Audio may not be particularly good in images. (Hess 33)

And affordances for composing for video appear in the chart as follows:

Projects dealing with history, a temporal unfolding events, physical movement, or facial expressions may be suited to video, which can show historical artifacts, and convey emotion and body language. Video can be combined with still photos, title screens, and voice-over narration to create a well-rounded presentation using sound and alphabetic text along with visuals depicting silent movement or gesture... Video may not be particularly good in depicting people's internal thoughts. (Hess 33)

The language and presentation of these *affordances* is notable in a number of respects.

First, Hess only seems to use *affordance* in the chart, suggesting that what audio and

video “may not be particularly good in,” their limitations, also fall into that category (removing *constraints* once again). Next, what audio can do (and not do) here is primarily technical—it’s about sound, not visuals. But the affordances of video run a full multimodal range of possibilities. Some of these are technical—real affordances—some of them are more representational. Conveying emotion, for instance, seems to fall into the latter category. But the limitation on video, what it “may not be particularly good in,” is where things might become problematic. Whereas audio is limited by not being visual, video seems to be limited, not by technical elements, but by representational convention. The “depicting of people’s internal thoughts” reads like an issue of accepted, or conventional, representational practice, and this particular “affordance” is often attributed elsewhere to one particular mode: writing.<sup>59</sup> But it’s not necessarily clear in Hess’ chart, or in his text, what role “people’s internal thoughts” might have in composing in the college classroom. It’s possible, for instance, that the essay, likely the most common form of alphabetic literacy in the writing class, might capture—or represent—internal thought, but it’s not clear. Hess does suggest assigning “written reflection” on multimodal assignments to encourage “critical thinking” (33), but that particular approach may pose its own problem: writing becomes the actual, possibly only, location of thought processes in multimodal composing, a situation which might work against

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<sup>59</sup> In fact, it might be that this kind of “affordance” is more prominent in, say, fictional narratives than in the essayistic prose often taught in composition classes.

Selfe's interest in *all available means* of persuasion and expression" ("The Movement" 618).

It's possible that, ironically, the privileging of the text is present in this discussion of multimodal affordances, where reflection encourages critical thinking, or where writing is the site of such thought. This is not necessarily an expansion of composing practices or a way around sedimented habits. In some ways, it's merely a reification—there's even some hint of Jameson's arguments to legitimate writing about the visual (discussed at length in Interchapter Three). In reality, most of the texts in the Selfe collection seem to struggle with just what to make of *affordances* of multimodal compositions, and especially of audio. Like Hess, Daniel Keller lauds the use of audio essays in his chapter, "Thinking Rhetorically." But, like Hess and Takayoshi and Selfe, Keller doesn't provide much insight into the usefulness of a conversation *about* the affordances of audio:

The **affordances** of sound in this multimodal essay make it possible for the audience to get a sense of Mary's speech patterns, her Southern accent, and the timbre and speed of her voice. These qualities would be difficult to convey in an essay that was composed only of words printed on page. (55, bold in original)

But it's not entirely clear from Keller's text what rhetorical end these qualities might serve. Some possibilities include, say, a productive conversation about regional identities, or even the possibility of confronting regional biases: how, for instance, would students in some parts of the U.S. respond to a Southern accent? Is there then an opportunity to discuss the social and cultural aspects of different regional linguistic realities? These questions, the questions about *meaning-making*, seem to be left in the air.

The risk of these kinds of approaches, then, might lie in the issue that Hess actually addresses about writing: if multimodality is a means to complicate the “sedimented practices” of alphabetic or essayistic composition, there might be a risk of adopting similarly codified—albeit different—practices. Without more elaboration, the *affordances* of audio might be set, and communicated to students, as merely “pacing” and “accent.” What, then, are the implications of that fairly narrow view of audio? It seems that this approach might reduce the expansive potential of multimodality that Selfe and others seem to prize. Thus, instead of a *rhetoric* of multimodality, we might be left with a *grammar*.

A grammar of multimodality, as I deduce it from the teaching materials in Selfe’s collection, would seem to be composed of the narrowly defined technical or representational characteristics of each mode rather than their persuasive (rhetorical) possibilities. To paraphrase Hess and Keller, *sound* can “do” pacing and accent; *video* can “do” facial expression. In this case, *affordance*, along with *constraints*, come to stand not for what Gibson might call the “higher-order” properties, but the basic, simple ones: pacing, accent, facial expression, and words uttered. *Together* these qualities speak to some sort of possibility of persuasive (rhetorical) meaning, but taken individually—and without commentary or analysis of implication—they don’t seem to function the same way. In fact, when reflective writing is assigned as the site of thought, where students make use of alphabetic literacy in order to make meaning, the potential of multimodality seems to be more in providing materials for analysis rather than new means of composing

or persuasion. Here, again, we see a separation and a hierarchy between word and image. But, as Mitchell observes, this is “not *only* a formal issue,” it is, as the many analyses of the relation between text and image here and throughout this dissertation show, a kind of basic cultural trope that seems to ignore the mutual contamination of text and image. The result of the relation as established here might be illustrated by the elements of Mitchell’s rhetoric of images. In a *grammar* of multimodality, we might only be focusing on what a mode can *do* (Mitchell’s *what it says*). To embrace a *rhetoric* of multimodality, and to acknowledge the kind of “composite” nature of meaning-making across modes, we would need to add *what we say about* multimodality, or how the modes function in a larger context of *meaning-making*: why, for instance, is someone’s accent important for the persuasive possibilities of a sound recording? This is not a question that we are unprepared to answer, but if, as Selfe argues, other modes have rhetorical ends, it is the type of question that would need to be explicitly asked and addressed.

In the interests of fairness, I see no *necessary* reason why a rhetoric of multimodality would not or could not be conducted in multiple modes. As Selfe argues in her response to Hesse, “no one medium or modality—certainly not writing—has a corner on reason, thoughtfulness, effectiveness, *or* glibness” (609, emphasis in original). Furthermore, my analysis of the teaching materials in Selfe’s collection should be qualified by an acknowledgement that the steps suggested, by all of the authors, constitute some *beginning* steps to integrate multimodal composing into the composition classroom. To his credit, Hess devotes considerable space in his essay to building

assignments, managing time and resources, and offering some general guidance to addressing the important elements of different modes and their technical realities. It is in this context that the chart discussed above, and its problematic elements, appears, and Keller's broader emphasis on integrating rhetorical concepts into work with multimodality seems to speak to concerns with meshing multimodal assignments with curricular requirements.

But this focus on the practical, the logistical, elements of incorporating multimodality into composition seems to work against itself. Selfe, recognizing the limits on time and resources for "any one course" suggests that she emphasizes "some basic rhetorical processes for analyzing and composing meaning that can serve students well in a range of communicative situations, with a range of audiences, and for a range of purposes" ("Response" 608). The materials in *Multimodal Composition*, however, at times emphasize the technical seemingly at the expense of the rhetorical. As I've argued above, "composing meaning" does not seem to enter into the usage of the terms *affordance* and *constraint* to describe what different modes can or cannot do. This, to me, constitutes the main problem in the (admittedly) early stages of a project like embracing multimodal composition: to use terms like *affordance* and *constraint*, especially as they are transformed (even distorted) by discourse at a threshold of invisibility, without some reflexive consideration (Mitchell's *what we say about them*) is to risk hindering the generative possibilities of the project itself.

In considering the terms themselves, I think it's worth asking what makes them so attractive. There is surprisingly little commentary on why the terms are useful or not or why they were even chosen to address the issue of different modes in the first place. In fact, only Wysocki seems to reflect much on what *affordance* and *constraint* actually seem to do in discussion, and her conclusion seems to be to cut *affordance* out of the discourse entirely. The general lack of such thinking across the conversation constitutes, of course, part of the problem I've suggested above: without that reflexivity on the meaning and function of terms, problems can arise. While the point I make here may be more speculative, I will suggest a couple of possibilities as to the attractiveness of the terms. First, it's possible that *affordance* is attractive because of its apparent positive connotation and versatility. It seems to speak to the opening of possibilities that Selfe and others value in multimodality, and even might evoke some of Kress' liberatory rhetoric of revolution. It also seems to be functional. From Gibson's even to Kress's usage, it's a seemingly versatile term that describes qualities that are not otherwise easy to define. On the other hand, it's perhaps maybe too open to interpretation, as Wysocki's critique suggests.

Conversely, *constraint*, as used by both Norman and Wysocki, may actually be the more powerful, or rhetorically inclined, term. While it might carry a negative connotation—to limit or prevent some action—it is fairly accurate for discussions in college composition about students entering into different discourse communities and rhetorical situations: that communities and situations have conventions, genres,

expectations, and, thus, constraints for the conducting of various business. Rhetorically, affordance may appeal to scholars interested in the digital turn; it may appeal to teachers, with its opening up of possibilities; it might also appeal to students for the same reason. But, rhetorically, constraint might be powerful too: it speaks of boundaries to push against, conventions that limit possibility that, as Wysocki observes, can be obeyed or resisted. Finally, *affordance*, with its “feel” of liberation, might confuse or distort some of the goals of compositional pedagogy and practice. As Hesse observes, Composition has some responsibility to various stakeholders, including students. It might not be fully ethical to claim that the compositional practices of students are as open—as seemingly unrestrained—as the possibilities of an unexplored mode. *Constrain* might, in the end, be more honest, or more interested in balance between the possibilities and the limitations of new compositional possibilities. And this, in fact, speaks to what Kress claims is his intention in exploring the image revolution: to “provide means of describing and analysing what is going on, and to provide means of navigating between the Scylla of nostalgia and pessimism and the Charybdis of unwarranted optimism” (*Literacy* 6).

In this chapter, I’ve examined a smaller set of texts that enter into discourse at a particular threshold of invisibility: the introduction of multimodality into Composition studies and pedagogical practice. By tracing the lineage and evolution of the key terms *affordance* and *constraint*, I’ve attempted to demonstrate another approach to locating key foci for the rhetorical analysis of discourse at and around thresholds of invisibility. Whereas in Chapters Two and Three, I examined which terms and orientations seem to



be underpinning the arguments and reasoning of participants in those respective discussions, here I examined how the terms themselves moved through the stages of discourse and seemed to gain and lose valuable meanings and implications along the way, and how those meanings and implications came to influence how scholars—and teachers—of writing attempted to “account” for the new dimension of multimodality in their discourse. Both approaches—the examination of discussions and the tracing of terms—demonstrated some of the problems that can arise as a result of the wrangle of discourse at a threshold of invisibility. In Chapter Three, the focal point of the discussion, video games, was overlooked as the ideological underpinnings of various terministic screens came into conflict. In this chapter, terms of a *rhetoric* became terms of a *grammar*, that is, a convergence of terministic forces with various emphases on psychology, design, literacy, semiotics, and rhetoric were reduced by the “practical” or logistical requirements of integration into classroom practice. Both of these cases, as I will suggest in my brief conclusion, called for attention to the *terms* of discussion, the underpinnings of the arguments and reasoning deployed in an effort to account for new circumstances.

## Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted, using a variety of critical discourses and encounters, to enact a type of what Kenneth Burke calls the “end” of criticism, a “criticism of criticism” that seeks to “rehash the whole business of orientation, of imaginative and ideological symbolism, of ‘meanings’ in their double function of both guiding and misguiding us” (Jay 206-207). I see the threshold of invisibility as a useful concept that can direct the attention (or, as Burke might write it, the “*attention*”) of rhetorical and critical analysis to collections of discourse that seem confused, chaotic, or overly contrary. In these kinds of exchanges, it’s sometimes hard to track the flow of discussion, to see how participants talk to—and often past—each other. It was, in fact, the chaos (and the puzzling irascibility) in the narratology versus ludology debate (discussed in Chapter Three) that helped me to generate the threshold of invisibility concept. I found the “debate” label (and framework) misleading, and that left me with precious few organizational schema to make sense of the discussion. And in the case of debates on digital photography, the idea provided an opportunity to “drill down” to some of the core issues of difference, and how the various perspectives tended to overlook some important possibilities—ethical concerns for journalism—due to arguments focused on paradigms in photography criticism.

That said, I have not proposed thresholds of invisibly as full-blown theoretical constructs in their own right, nor do I see them as a firm theoretical framework or heuristic. My four “elements” of discourse at thresholds of invisibility—*habituation* of terms, some *barrier to communication*, *narrativizations* that attempt to contextualize the moment, some confusion of *diachronic* and *synchronic* elements—are intended to signal analytical potential, or to find places in discourse to attempt to “rehash” the orientations, ideologies, and meanings that underpin scholarly rhetorics. The concept and its elements are useful for knowing where to start, or as a way to identify the various interactions between arguments and perspectives. As I’ve shown throughout this dissertation, these sites of discourse are rife with possibilities for analysis, and they allow some insight into the forces that influence critical discourse *and* a view to its tendencies—there’s some predictability, some similarity to critics’ reactions to “new” things. There is, in short, a lot to be learned about how critics make meaning at these moments and how that meaning can, as Burke says, guide or misguide us.

While there is value in knowing where to look, there is also value in what is there to find. The stakes of these discussions often vary, but we’ve seen cases of what can be missed, overlooked, or what can actively distort possibilities. In Chapter Two, critics of photography seemed to talk past each other about digital photography, and in dismissing each other’s views due to adherence to differing paradigms; some seemingly valid ethical concerns were discounted as well. In Chapter Three, critics were so focused on political or speculative goals that they overlooked the main focus of discussion: video games.

Finally, in Chapter Four the confluence of forces in discussions on multimodal composing generated some initial approaches to teaching practice that might have worked directly in opposition to the stated goals of embracing multimodality in the first place.

In short, I see the threshold of invisibility concept as a useful perspective, a potentially productive tool that draws on established rhetorical theory—and recognizable patterns in scholarly discourse—to direct analytical focus to instances in scholarly rhetorics that require some attention or understanding. I hope that the elements I've proposed, and the example discourses I've examined in this dissertation serve as a starting point, a productive beginning for a useful way of *finding* other starting points, or other entryways, into the sometimes confusing (and, as Aarseth would remind us, the metaphorical) labyrinth of scholarly rhetoric.

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