Chapter 3

“HAVING A VOICE”
TOWARD AN AUTISTIC COUNTERDISCOURSE
OF DOCUMENTARY

“I Am Autism”

In September 2009 Autism Speaks, the world’s largest autism research foundation, released a fund-raising video that drew vocal protests from the autistic community, forcing the organization to remove the link to the video from its website.1 Directed by the award-winning director Alfonso Cuarón, himself the parent of an autistic child, the four-minute-long video, titled “I Am Autism,” was met with “horror” by representatives of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, who organized a series of protests denouncing the “fearmongering” tactics of Autism Speaks.2

The first half of this video fuses a characteristic trope of the horror film with the documentary realism of the home movie to insist on the urgency of finding a cure for autism. In a succession of slowed-down home video–like scenes, a number of silent, anonymous, solitary children are revealed to be the unsuspecting victims of the protagonist, autism, whose acousmatic voice emanates menacingly from off-screen. The cool objectivity of this male voice, set off by the metallic hiss of the sparse audioscape, heightens the horror of the words it utters in the first person: “I am autism. I’m visible in your children, but if I can help it, I am invisible to you until it’s too late. I know where you live. And guess what? I live there too. I hover around all of you. I know no color barrier, no religion, no morality, no currency. I speak your language fluently. And with every voice I take away, I acquire yet another language. I work very quickly. I work faster than pediatric AIDS, cancer, and diabetes combined. . . . You ignored me. That was a mistake.”3 The video unfolds with autism promising to divest the families of autistic children of their marital bliss, money, sleep, and hope. With each threat, the wholesome landscapes of childhood seen in the brief vignettes—playground, baseball pen, backyard, beach, aquarium, school yard—assume the form of potential disease vectors, while the innocent gestures of the children as they strum their hands across a table or stare into space begin to resemble the symptoms of an epidemic that renders them mute and alien.

In the second half of the video, the crisis is abruptly averted. The scenes are played over but as family portraits: a new cast of characters—siblings, parents, extended families, and friends—emerges from off-screen to envelop the children in a communal embrace. The video speeds up, and the frozen faces of the children break into smiles, as an uplifting guitar theme and the sounds of youthful laughter announce their release into sociality. Parallel-ling these reversals, a chorus of predominantly female voices takes over the vocal commentary on behalf of the parents, families, siblings, friends, doctors, and therapeutic staff of autistics from “all climates” and “all faiths” the world over. This “community of warriors,” we are told, are united across their differences by their common quest for a cure for autism—to “knock down” the “wall” imprisoning their children by any means necessary, be it “technology,” “prayers,” “voodoo,” or “genetic studies.” In unison they speak back to autism: “We have a voice!”

The most striking objections to this video have come from autistic individuals who resent Autism Speaks’s attempts to ventriloquize their concerns. “Autism Speaks,” these critics argue, “does not represent Autistic people or

FIGURE 3.1 Still from “I Am Autism” YouTube video (2009)
autistics are highly talkative and articulate, while others are nonverbal or
minimally verbal and communicate through voice-to-text and other assistive
technologies, including facilitated communication (FC), a technique in which
a facilitator guides one’s hand to letters or icons on a keyboard, reading the
words and sentences aloud. Many autistics develop language on a nonnorma-
tive timeline, and some have been known to lose their verbal faculties later
in life. In addition, autistics frequently exhibit echolalia, or the repetition of
certain words or phrases in socially inappropriate or irrelevant circumstances,
often detached from their conventional meanings.

From a humanitarian standpoint, the absence of articulate speech is
regarded as a sign of underdevelopment, which is explicit in
Th. Autism Speaks’s video, also implicitly guides the therapeutic treatment of
autism spectrum disorders. The acquisition of speech and language, like
self-recognition, is considered a necessary step toward becoming human; this
is why autistics, like children, animals, and other “primitives,” are believed
to require a vocal delegate speaking on their behalf until they can speak for
themselves. In stark contrast, many autistics regard their range of verbal ca-
pacities as a spectrum of neurological diversity that they wish to preserve,
and they assert the value of atypical neurological development as a normal
human variation. They protest that autism is an integral part of their iden-
tity, not an imposition from without, as Autism Speaks’s ominous rendition
of the voice of autism suggests. While proponents of neurodiversity do not
deny the real challenges of everyday life for autistics and their caregivers, they
also acknowledge the desirable aspects of living with autism that would be
eliminated by a cure. The assumption that autistics are in need of “saving” or a
“cure,” they argue, is profoundly “neurotypical”: it misrecognizes neurological
difference as a disease in need of rectification or, worse, elimination—an idea
that many autistics strongly oppose. Disability studies scholars have echoed
this viewpoint, pointing out the contradictory investments of social justice
discourses in “ableist” metaphors of bodily ability (such as speech and mo-
bility) as benchmarks of political subjectivity.

The predicament of autistics confronted by humanitarian agents speak-
ing on their behalf also provides fresh insight into the positivist documen-
tary tradition of presenting a subjective perspective about the world as an
objective statement of fact. This tactic has historically been used, accord-
ing to Johannes Fabian, in traditional ethnographies that purport to object-
ively depict non-Western cultures. Just as the ethnographic native is said
to be “born with rhythm” by the anthropologist who did not see him grow up, learn, or practice (per Fabian), the autistic is seen and heard by humanitarian organizations like Autism Speaks as a primitive, lacking the capacity for mental reasoning that “proper” speech is thought to transmit.3 Fabian argues that positivist approaches to ethnography deny the coevalness or contemporaneity of other cultures by placing them in a temporal frame outside the discursive present of the ethnographer and their audience.12 Film scholar Fatimah Tobing Rony describes the ethnographic tendency to represent non-Western cultures as primitive or outside modern history as a form of cinematic taxidermy or mumification: a practice that seeks to artificially salvage a dying way of life by freezing it in time.13 Autism Speaks’s video enacts a similar temporal manipulation. The ejection of autistics from the intersubjective dialogue between the voice of autism and the parents and families of autistics—that is, the various humanitarian agents speaking on behalf of autistics—positions autistic modes of communication and relationality in a private self-referential world outside time.

When we reframe the question of speaking and being spoken for in this way, we can see how the rhetorical immediacy and persuasiveness of the voice-over in Autism Speaks’s video turns on the temporal distancing of autistic modes of communication. This insight provides a point of departure for this chapter, in which I examine what happens when the documentary tropes of persuasive speech are used to “give a voice” to autistics. My inquiry centers on the first-person documentary voice-over. The authoritative immediacy of this trope, employed in Autism Speaks’s video for the voice of autism, has in recent years been borrowed by a number of documentary films that respond to the problematic representational politics of Autism Speaks’s video by depicting autistic protagonists speaking for themselves in the form of the first-person voice-over. Whereas this trope is synonymous in the humanitarian context with having a voice, and thus with being human, I argue that from an autistic perspective it can be seen as a documentary immediation—one whose effects of unmediated presence and proximity are achieved by denying the coevalness of autistic modes of language, communication, and relationality.

I begin with a survey of recent documentary films that depict autistic individuals as protagonists, filmmakers, and scriptwriters. I isolate and perform close readings of two of these films: *Autism Is a World* (dir. Gerardine Wurzburg, 2004), a television documentary produced for CNN, and “In My Lan-

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mentary’s social point of view, charting the genre’s evolution from objective, Griersonian exposition to more reflexive modes of narration as an indicator of its gradual departure from its realist, rhetorical origins. Other documentary scholars have corroborated Nichols’s narrative, locating films featuring a highly reflexive first-person voice-over as an enlightened alternative to documentary realism. The concept of the autistic voice critiques the enduring role of the speaking voice in documentary’s reality effects and, in so doing, joins the efforts of feminist documentary critics and filmmakers who have challenged the equation of speaking out and progress. This critique also points to the limitations of the way reflexivity is understood in documentary—a theme that chapter 4 takes up in greater detail.

In the final section of the chapter, I use Michel Foucault’s landmark study, *Madness and Civilization*, as a guide to the humanitarian discursive history of autism. Foucault’s method in this foundational book, which aimed to make unreason speak without destroying it, allows me to situate my three media examples—“I Am Autism,” *Autism Is a World*, and “In My Language”—as different points along the representational spectrum of documentary voicing. These voices, which I dub dominant, resistent, and autistic, also map onto the major representational tendencies in contemporary diagnostic debates around autism and productively illuminate the contradictions of producing a “discourse of unreason on reason.” I approach these debates by bringing together perspectives from science and technology studies, disability studies, and critical theory. This analysis of who speaks for autism also sheds light on the different voices speaking for the child and for the disaster victim in the previous two chapters.

**Who Speaks for Autism? An Analysis of Three Voice-Overs**

In the weeks following the release of Autism Speaks’s controversial video, autistic self-advocates responded with number of parodies that foregrounded the epistemological sleight of hand involved in the original video’s first-person voice-over commentary. The anonymous blogger Socrates’s video “I Am Autism Speaks” makes a conservative but ingenious change to the text of the original commentary to reveal that the “I” in the video that purports to be the voice of autism itself is in fact the voice of the organization Autism Speaks. Much of the image track is left intact, while the delivery of the commentary in a monotonous electronic voice casts Autism Speaks as a soulless and shamelessly profit-driven corporation.16 Another popular parody, “I’m Autistic: I Can Speak,” reclaims the first-person voice for the autistic. The plain red background of this video focuses attention on the voice, which sings an altered commentary, describing itself as “different, not weak,” “smart,” “sensitive,” and “equal in humanity.”17 Thus, each of these parodies shows how Autism Speaks camouflages its own perspective—the perspective of medical discourse—by introducing itself as the voice of autism (“I”) speaking to an audience (“you”) on behalf of its victims (“autistics who cannot speak for themselves”).

Strikingly, the first-person voice-over has become the idiom of choice not only among parodists of the “I Am Autism” video but also in several recent documentaries seeking to authenticate the perspectives of autistic people. A number of documentary shorts released over the last two decades deploy the first-person voice-over to enable autistic individuals to speak authoritatively and directly about their experiences with autism. These include *Jam Jar* (dir. Simon Everson, 1995), *Autism Is a World* (dir. Gerardeine Wurzburg, 2004), *My Classic Life as an Artist: A Portrait of Larry Bissonnette* (dir. Douglas Biklen, 2004), and “In My Language” (dir. Amanda Baggs, 2007). With the exception of “In My Language,” which was written, directed, and published on YouTube by Baggs, the remaining films were produced by allies and advocates in collaboration with autistic subjects—respectively Donna Williams, Larry Bissonnette, and Sue Rubin.

Before I turn to these reappropriations of the first-person voice-over, I unpack how “I Am Autism” uses one of the oldest rhetorical tropes of documentary immediacy—voice-of-God narration—to authoritatively convey that autism is a humanitarian emergency requiring urgent intervention. I then examine the uses and subversions of this trope in Wurzburg’s *Autism Is a World* and Baggs’s “In My Language” in order to understand what is gained and what is lost when the first-person voice-over is deployed to give a voice to autistics.

The authoritative, incontrovertible message of Autism Speaks’s video regarding the pathology of autism is the combined effect of several classic conventions of Griersonian narration. Many documentaries of the Griersonian school, inspired by the iconic series *The March of Time*, featured didactic expository commentary delivered in a stentorian male voice speaking in the third person from off-screen. The hierarchical location of this acoustic voice “above” the diegetic sounds and images, its emanation from an unknowable off-screen space, and its economical and detached delivery...
worked in concert with its social and rhetorical coding to reinforce its meta-
physical status and objectivity. Such a voice forcefully drew attention away 
from its own source, materiality, and embodiment toward its message, earn-
ing the informal moniker of “voice-of-God narration.” John Grierson openly 
viewed documentary as a form of propaganda: the point of this form of vocal 
commentary was to strive for denotational clarity as much as possible, by an-
choring or fixing the meanings of images as well as minimizing the grain that 
would open them up to interpretative play.27

The voice of autism in “I Am Autism” bears the trace of voice-of-God nar-
rative, with all of its connotations of omniscience, omnipotence, and omni-
presence. The commanding presence of this disembodied voice has much to 
do with its emanation from an “other” space beyond the diegesis, its location 
“above” everything we see and hear, and the fact that its source remains un-
seen. According to Michel Chion, an acousmatic voice (a voice that is heard 
but whose source is not seen) evokes archaic and dramatic psychic vulnerabil-
ities for the spectating subject, including those associated with the mother’s 
unseen voice. The audiovisual architecture of cinema has the distinct capac-
ity, he writes, to imbue the off-screen voice with a more-than-real presence 
that relies on the uncertain absence of an actual body that is liable to appear 
in the visual field at any moment.28 The voice of autism makes overt the im-
plied menace of its acousmatic presence when it states, “I am invisible to you 
until it’s too late.” It is unclear whether autism speaks from within the hap-
less, voiceless children seen in the images, or whether it hovers around them, 
threatening to possess them at any moment.

The urgent, forceful temporality of this video is also an effect of the ex-
pository voice-over’s coded sonic logic of subtraction. Although the voice-
over is “added” in the manner of a supplement, it works, as Rey Chow has 
noted, by “hollowing-out,” or subtracting information from the image.29 The 
removal of autistics from the intersubjective (“I-you”) exchange between the 
speaking voice and the spectator can be regarded as a function of this hollow-
ing out of the image by the voice-over: the autistic children represented in 
the video appear devoid of subjectivity because they are effectively reduced 
to visual evidence shoring up the video’s message that autism is a deficit or 
impairment. In an essay on vocal narration in classical documentary, Charles 
Wolfe describes this dynamic as follows: “Those who speak in voice-over may 
know, comment on, or drown out sounds from the world a film depicts, but 
the relationship is asymmetrical: voices from that register have no reciprocal

power to introduce or comment on the voices that overlay this world. We 
might want to say, then, that voice-over covers the world of the ‘diegesis.’”30

This drowning out takes place at multiple textual levels in the “I Am Au-
th 

cism” video. Formally, as Wolfe describes, the voice-over flattens the mean-
ings that lie beneath it in the audiovisual hierarchy. Furthermore, the narra-
tive capacity of the voice-over to compress story time condenses the complex 
discursive history of autism into a tense, timely event. Rhetorically, it speaks 
directly to the audience, unlike the more distant third-person voice, elid-
ing layers of mediation in an implied reference to face-to-face conversation.
What this form of voicing loses in complexity, it gains in denotational clarity 
and authority—it is an especially compact, sharply defined, and impactful 
form of speech.31 The rhetorical urgency of didactic expository narration ex-
plains why this convention—which, according to Wolfe, fell out of favor pre-
cisely because it took itself too seriously—continues to be used in humani-
tarian media: here, it unequivocally renders the so-called autism epidemic 
as an emergency requiring action, not contemplation.32 The representation 
of autistics as victims requiring immediate therapeutic assistance is exacer-
bated by the conflation of autistics with children. This is a routine strategy in 
contemporary mainstream autism advocacy, even though autism is a lifelong 
spectrum condition, and not all autistics are nonverbal, the coded vulnerabil-
ity of nonverbal autistic children makes them a universal target for projective 
identification, and thus for humanitarian intervention.33

Given the strategic advantages offered by a didactic expository voice-over, 

it is unsurprising that voice-over commentary has been employed in recent 
documentary films such as Jam Jar, Autism Is a World, and My Classic Life as 
a way of foregrounding the perspectives of their autistic protagon-
ists over and above those of doctors, medical experts, and other “foreign 
observers.” To quote Donna Williams, the protagonist of Jam Jar, these films 
aim to take an “inside-out approach to making a documentary” from an autis-
tic perspective.34 To this end, all three films employ a first-person voice-over 
as their rhetorical spine, through which all other perspectives are mediated. 
In addition to providing an “inner perspective” on autism, this technique is 
also effective in enabling disabled subjects to exert as much authorial control 
as possible over the message of the film, short of producing the films them-
tselves. The first-person voice-over is also chosen for its suitability in trans-
lating the autobiographical writings of the protagonists into an audiovisual 
idiom. In each of these films, the vocal commentary is compiled from the

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protagonists’ writings: Williams reads her own writings aloud and alternates between serving as a frame narrator and directly addressing the camera, while in the cases of Rubin and Bissonnette, who are mostly nonverbal and communicate through FC, the commentary is read aloud by surrogate voice artists.

These films employ a mode of first-person voice-over narration that combines didactic exposition and an emotive, embodied, and expressive mode of address. They straddle the line between what Nichols calls the expository and performative modes of documentary and borrow elements from each: whereas the expository mode has a rhetorical and polemical agenda that is accomplished through an appeal to objectivity, the performative mode is more concerned with exploring a personal, autobiographical, and highly subjective perspective on the world, often that of an underrepresented or misrepresented social group. The merger between expository and performative modes of voicing in these films evidences the operation of a pervasive idiom of humanitarian representation that I will call the interventionist first-person voice-over. This form of narration, “pivoted documentary’s legendary personal documentary,” to borrow from Alisa Lebow’s description of personal documentary. The seemingly countervailing impulses of objectivity and subjectivity in this type of voice-over have the combined effect of establishing the unequivocal authority of the autistic protagonist’s personal, subjective perspective on the world.

When subjectivity is mobilized for humanitarian purposes, as it is in the aforementioned films about autism, it assumes a referential and rhetorical function, far from being rendered in a complex, uncertain, or hybridized light (the latter are traits that Nichols attributes to the performative mode of first-person voicing). The interventionist first-person voice-over convinces us forcefully of the validity, authenticity, and legitimacy of the speaker’s interior existence. This subjugated interiority serves, in turn, as a factual ground from which to counter and correct medical views of autism that would position it as an impairment. At such moments, autobiography becomes an evidentiary practice that has the effect of tethering or grounding the subjectivity of the autistic in the identitarian domain of their disability. The protagonist becomes a native informant of sorts, expounding directly and authoritatively on the subjective experience, practical challenges, and perceptual world of living with autism. The forceful authority of the interventionist first-person voice-over derives from the expository techniques of hollowing out, subtracting, or drowning out commonly seen in the Griersonian mode of voice-over narration.

The question then arises in relation to an aesthetics of immediation: Are the subtractions involved in first-person expository voice-over commentary also temporal? How do they impact the protracted time and mediated quality of autistic communication? I will answer this question through a close reading of Wurzburg’s film Autism Is a World. Although several of my comments are equally pertinent to My Classic Life as an Artist and Jam Jar, Wurzburg’s Oscar-nominated television documentary allows us to see the exclusions and subtractions of the interventionist first-person voice-over as a documentary immediation—as well as the larger medial and ideological frameworks that are held in place by these exclusions—in a particularly crystalline form.

As with the aforementioned films about Williams and Bissonnette, Rubin’s personal struggles with autism, and especially her difficulties with communication, define the narrative arc of Autism Is a World. A twenty-six-year-old college history major at the time of the film’s release, Rubin attributes to FC her transformation from a “nonperson” to a successful student living in an assisted-living facility, an involved participant in decisions regarding her life, and a frequent speaker at conferences for and about those on the autistic spectrum. The film chronicles Rubin’s transformation upon being introduced to FC at the age of thirteen, before which she had been believed to be mentally retarded. With practice, Rubin explains, this communication system helped her to recognize voices and words in the sounds that floated over her. “Her mind began to wake up,” even though she continues to struggle with echolalia and uncontrollable sounds and movements.” In her conference presentations, some of which are featured in the film, Rubin often offers motivational affirmation and aims to “enlighten autistic” individuals as to the potential of their own voices.

In addition to serving as its thematic preoccupation, Rubin’s difficulties with verbal communication also set up the formal problematic of Wurzburg’s film when it comes to the discursive conventions of documentary. Rubin is mostly nonverbal. Although she communicates verbally with her support staff and family through a few words and phrases, her utterances are not comprehensible to most people. For all other conversations—in classes, at conferences, with professors and doctors, and so on—she relies on FC, picking out letters individually on a keyboard that are then read aloud by a support-staff member who sits by her side, or preprogramming questions...
into a speech-generating device that can be replayed electronically. But even as Rubin acknowledges how language and facilitated speech have allowed her to participate in social and intellectual life, she also confesses to feeling exhausted by the effort required to stay focused during conversations and in her college lectures. There are times when she needs to “zone out,” retreat into solitude, and let the “autistic part of [her] brain take over.” She does this by watching water run through a faucet, or drizzling water over the spoons that she carries about with her as an unexplainable source of comfort.

Scenes depicting FC are necessary and valuable subject matter for the film, in that they demonstrate the technological and interpersonal negotiations involved in everyday conversation for nonverbal autistic people. At the same time, this prolonged and visibly mediated form of communication also presents an obstacle when it comes to soliciting Rubin’s version of events through interviews. As a mode of address, FC is antagonistic to the discursive immediacy of the documentary interview and the observed conversation, in that Rubin’s comments and responses are never delivered spontaneously in her own voice. Instead, a facilitator, who reads off letters and words one by one, occasionally stopping to predict the text, voices them. The facilitator often provides her own interjections, prompting Rubin with facial expressions and interpretive remarks, and occasionally responds to others on Rubin’s behalf. This laborious process is sometimes interrupted by episodes of echolalia that cause Rubin to stumble over spelling and grammar that she then goes back to correct, prompted by her support staff.

To accord with the time constraints of the broadcast documentary genre, these long scenes are presented in a truncated and heavily edited form that captures the gist of Rubin’s communiqués and edits out the mediations of her facilitator. Much of the lag time is cut out so that we hear the facilitator name a couple of letters, followed by the complete phrase or sentence. These elisions are especially noticeable in scenes where Rubin is shown interviewing doctors about her condition—a technique used by the film to center her perspective—in that her utterances are subject to visible mediation while those of her interviewees are not. Although Autism Is a World is framed and marketed as a film narrated by an autistic voice, the unavoidable display of editorial interference at moments like these attests not to Rubin’s voice but to Wurzburg’s, as well as to the determining power of CNN, her cable network sponsor and coproducer of the film.

Wurzburg’s truncation of scenes depicting FC in order to center Rubin’s voice disavows the resolutely intersubjective nature of this mode of communication, as well as the complexly interconstitutive form of subjectivity that it facilitates. Cartwright notes that since its introduction in the United States, the legitimacy of FC in bringing autistics to voice has been questioned owing to widespread anxiety that the voices of autistics are manipulated by their facilitators.28 The singular subjectivity implied by the first-person voice-over, to which Wurzburg turns to resolve the dilemmas of allowing Rubin to “speak for herself,” wards off this anxiety. The film is cohered together by autobiographical commentary composed by Rubin (credited as the film’s writer), voiced by the actress Julianna Margulies. As the film opens on Rubin’s face framed in the doorway of her home, we hear Margulies’s voice say, “My name is Sue Rubin. I am twenty-six years old. I’ve written these thoughts about my life because I don’t really talk. This is not my voice, but these are my words.” With this announcement of the centrality of Rubin’s message rather than its vocal medium, her commentary is established from the start as the film’s narrative voice and organizing principle. Subsequently, the remainder of the film is represented as a linguistic event of Rubin’s speech, even though Margulies’s delivery, which has been praised as “sensitive” and “dramatic,” does much to set the emotional and subjective tone of the film.29 Rubin’s commentary is an intermittent presence throughout the film that supplies much of the

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What is more, the superior location of Margulies’s voice-over in the audio-visual hierarchy naturalizes its status as the telos of Rubin’s communicative efforts—one that reflects Rubin’s own desire to be seen as a thinking, feeling person—rather than one mode of expression among others. Thus, even though Margulies’s voice-over seems like an innocuous, natural, and empathetic choice for Rubin’s inner voice, its operations are quite complex. The consequence of representing this voice-over commentary as the ideal, successful realization of Rubin’s communicative potential is that the coevalness of all of the other, autistic forms of communication in which she is shown engaging, including FC, is effectively denied. In the formal hierarchy of the film, these halting, nonverbal utterances are cast as the primitive precursors of the “proper” speech evidenced in the voice-over.

The precise operation through which the film achieves this effect of temporal distancing can be observed in how it abbreviates the durational logic of autistic communication into visual motifs or bridges. The scenes of Rubin “zoning out” by watching tap water flow over a spoon, or the moments during FC when her attention drifts elsewhere, never remain on-screen long enough to assume the status of communication or events in their own right. The latter are edited out altogether. The former are employed as brief transitions between other scenes, with the camera often zooming in on Rubin’s face as if to emphasize her humanity. The superimposition of Margulies’s voice-over, in conjunction with Wurzburg’s editorial and compositional choices, turns the scenes that might potentially open onto a different, autistic economy of voicing into a form of evidence that signifies interiority. In this way, all that is “out of time” or potentially “meaningless” about autistic communication is turned by Wurzburg’s film into a timely, meaningful illustration that can be accommodated within the standardized duration of the television documentary.

A viewing of Baggs’s “In My Language” makes it clearer that the autistic voice to which a film such as Wurzburg’s lays claim is a casualty of the interventionist first-person voice-over rather than its referent. Structurally, this eight-minute-long video, which Baggs posted to YouTube in 2007, is the inverse of Autism Is a World. The illustrative sounds and images that serve mainly as supporting evidence in Wurzburg’s film are the main event in the first half of Baggs’s video, which consists entirely of a number of encounters resembling the transitory scenes where Rubin is shown “zoning out.” These scenes are presented without explanatory commentary, accompanied only

![Figure 3.4. Still from opening sequence of Autism Is a World by Gerardine Wurzburg (2004)](image)
by a wordless voice that hums meditatively to itself. The video opens with a medium shot of Baggs, backlit by a window, flapping hir hands and moving back and forth in hir living room. In the following scenes, Baggs interacts with a series of everyday items in hir home in ways that don’t necessarily correspond to their uses as objects or their status as “things” that belong to a different ontological category than humans: sie strums hir fingers across a computer keyboard, pats and flicks at a beaded necklace, flutters a receipt in the wind, strokes the ridges of a griddle pan, vigorously fondles the knob of a drawer, smells and rubs hir face against a book, and waves and wags hir fingers in front of the camera.

As we move through these encounters, the camera framing becomes part of the textural world being explored, as Baggs zooms and reframes without concern for focalizing the “event” in each scene with any particular fidelity. Sie moves in or out to focus on the texture of the object or the movements of hir hand that interest hir, and at other times the camera looks awry so that the action is limited to a corner of the frame. Hir face is seldom in focus, so that the human face or its stand-in, the speaking voice, does not organize our relationship to the diegesis, as it does in *Autism Is a World*. The soundtrack

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converges randomly and serendipitously with the image, as Baggs’s humming sounds are occasionally punctuated rhythmically, and at other times drowned out, by the scratching, tapping, grating, and fluttering sounds produced through hir interactions with various materials. The camera, in hir hands, becomes a haptic, sonic eye, to borrow Laura Marks’s description of this feminist video technique: rather than scrutinizing the object in each scene with a controlling, penetrating gaze, sie grazes the surface of the materials with which sie interacts, using the camera to immerse hirself in textures, sounds, and movements instead of abstracting hirself from hir environment.30

In the second half of the video, titled “Translation,” these scenes are repeated with subtitled voice-over commentary in the first person by Baggs in which sie describes the previous part of the video as expressions of hir “native language.” Since Baggs is almost entirely nonverbal and often communicates through text-based interfaces, hir voice-over consists of typed commentary vocalized using text-to-speech software. The speech-generating device through which Baggs’s typed commentary is filtered renders hir words in an uncanny mechanical monotone that deflates the attempt to read it as an interior monologue or to scan it for signs of personality or gender. The point of hir video, Baggs tells us, is not to lay bare the “bizarre workings of the autistic mind” but to acknowledge “the existence and value of many different kinds of thinking and interaction in a world where how close you can appear to a specific one of them determines whether you are seen as a real person . . . [with] any rights.” Baggs’s insistent use of first-person pronouns (I, me, mine) in hir “translation” might seem incongruous in light of this statement, in that Baggs uses them to claim and authenticate hir own unique form of subjectivity and voice. But the very point of Baggs’s commentary—which is as complex in its logic as it is articulate—is to show how the modes of relationality implied by grammatical personhood and articulate speech forcibly mediate hir access to political recognition. Baggs’s use of the genderless pronouns sie, hir, and hirs similarly comments on the restrictive and binary engendering of “proper” pronominal forms. Baggs’s decision to withhold this commentary until the second half of the video, and to frame it as a translation, is a provocation: it points out that the autistic voice cannot be heard, seen, or acknowledged until it begins to speak in a recognizable tongue. The lure of authentic insight into the “native” autistic mind is one that Baggs’s video never fulfills. Even as the label “translation” implies an interpretive key to Baggs’s so-called native language, the scenes that continue to play alongside hir commentary remain beguilingly opaque. In one of the rare instances in which Baggs synchronizes hir explanation to an action (sie is moving hir fingers in a stream of water), hir only explanation is that the action has no symbolic content or hidden message. Sie comments:

My language is not about designing words or even visual symbols for people to interpret. It is about being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment. In this part of the video the water doesn’t symbolize anything. I am just interacting with the water as the water interacts with me. Far from being purposeless, the way that I move is an ongoing response to what is around me. Ironically the way that I move when responding to everything around me is described as “being in a world of my own” whereas if I interact with a much more limited set of responses and only react to a much more limited part of my surroundings people claim that I am “opening up to true interaction with the world.” Baggs insists that hir own spoken words are merely an impoverished translation of a mode of voicing that thoroughly exceeds any single signifying operation. Bearing out this critique, the content of hir voice-over refuses the explanatory charge conventionally assigned to the spoken word in documentary, as well as the interpretive finality that would otherwise be guaranteed by the location of hir verbal commentary “over” hir other audiovisual expressions.

The divergence between Baggs’s “native language” and its voice-over translation is beautifully hinted at in a scene that soon follows. Baggs tells us, “I smell things, I listen to things, I feel things, I taste things, I look at things,” and as if to illustrate these statements we see hir smelling hir hand, listening to a dreidel by spinning it near hir ear, rubbing hir face against a towel, tasting a pen, and turning hir eye sideways as if to look at hir ear. The fact that sie smells and tastes all the “wrong things” only indicates the dissonance of the singular “I” with hir perceptual and relational promiscuity, which sees a “you” not only in people but in everything around hir; sie continues, “It is not enough to look and listen and taste and smell and feel, I have to do those to the right things.” At best, sie seems to be saying, a first-person voice can speak “near” and not “for” oneself, to invoke feminist scholar and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha’s description of a form of speaking that “reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it.”31

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“In My Language” is evocative of Trinh’s experimental films in its deconstruction of the documentary tropes of humanitarian intervention. Trinh is well known for her critique of the totalizing language of ethnographic cinema, notably expository third-person narration and the observational conventions of wide-angle framing and minimal editing, for its way of disguising the filmmaker’s subjective perspective as scientific or factual information about non-Western cultures. Her film Reassemblage (1982), a collage of fragmented images of Senegal, operationalizes the strategy of “speaking nearby” in the form of a whispering, accented voice-over that acknowledges the futility of distilling the complexity of the African continent into a meaningful soundbyte. Baggs’s film arguably belongs within a corpus of feminist experimental filmmaking that includes Trinh, Leslie Thornton, and Patricia Gruben, among others. Thornton and Gruben have both experimented with muteness, inarticulateness, and aphasia as strategies that comment on the patriarchal exclusions of language, and the redoubling of these exclusions in classic Hollywood films that depict female bodies as an unspeaking spectacle. Linda Peckham’s description of Thornton’s film Adynata (1983) works just as well as a description of Baggs’s film: “The arrested articulation opens a space of doubt and disturbance at the center of the film,” Peckham writes, thus locating the enabling failure implied by the dual definitions of adynata: “a confession that words fail us” and “a stringing together of impossibilities” as a means of speaking.”

But whereas Trinh’s cinematic experiments aimed to alter the sensibilities of ethnographic film viewers, and Thornton and Gruben intervene in the habits of classical Hollywood spectators, Baggs’s address is to humanitarian audiences. Baggs extends Trinh’s critique to the humanitarian first-person voice-over, as the liberalized guise in which the so-called voiceless are turned into native informants observing and reporting authoritatively on their condition to their well-wishers. The mismatch of sound and image—between the clarity, authority, and immediacy of Baggs’s verbal commentary and her insistence on its poverty as a translation of her expressive acts—powerfully reveals the inadequacy of the notion of interiority associated with the first-person voice-over, as a privileged humanitarian trope of having a voice. Baggs evokes a parallel, unspoken economy of voicing that cannot be “possessed” but that emerges through the conflict between linguistic signification and a more expansive, embodied communicative comportment. Her choice of the first-person voice-over as the vehicle for this critique is both striking and counterintuitive: whereas the performative and expository functions associated with this mode of voicing are typically associated with the discursive liberation and legitimation of interiority, Baggs reveals that the humanitarian conception of interiority can in fact be seen as thoroughly confining from an autistic perspective.

In the following section, I situate Baggs’s critique of language and verbalization in this video in the larger context of her other writings as well as those of other autistic commentators. I argue that autistic accounts of language and communication contain the elements of a counterdiscourse of voicing that resonates with the work of cultural critics like Dolar and Barthes. These unlikely interlocutors mount a powerful critique of the logocentric notion of the voice that orients the humanitarian therapeutic discourse surrounding autism and its implied vision of humanity. As I go on to show over the course of the chapter, this critique is also deeply relevant to the history of documentary and its investments in the (speaking) voice as a marker of social and representational progress.
Autistic Counterdiscourses of the Voice

Autism has been regarded throughout its diagnostic history as a failure to communicate, and language and voice thus feature prominently in its diagnosis and treatment. The causes of autism remain in question, over seventy years after the pioneering research of Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger. The hypotheses that have propelled autism research at different historical moments are varied and controversial: they include maternal neglect, metabolic imbalances, vaccines, environmental toxins, genetic factors, and, most recently, neurological abnormalities in sensory perception and integration. The common denominator of these diagnoses has been a fascination with autism as a communicative disorder that impacts language ability and speech. This is borne out in the recently released fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published by the American Psychiatric Association, which defines autism as a spectrum disorder involving impairments in social communication and interaction and a range of imaginative behaviors and interests.

Overcoming this so-called deficit in communicative capacity remains, by and large, the goal of the growing list of customizable therapeutic interventions for autism spectrum disorders, which encompass various permutations of speech, occupational, and sensory integration therapies. Too numerous to systematize, the therapeutic approaches (e.g., behavioral, cognitive, psychopharmacological) currently employed in the treatment of autism spectrum disorders draw on different scientific models, employ different curricula, and activate different forms of relationships between the therapist and patient. However, the basic competencies they seek to cultivate—including eye contact, social interaction, compliance, attention, and imaginative-symbolic skills—are all implicitly or explicitly designed to cultivate a comportment toward human voices, faces, and language and to orient the cognitive, physiological, and affective supports of vocal sounding toward the production of words.

It is precisely this conflation of language and speech with voice that Baggs disputes when she writes, “Not everyone has words but everyone has a voice and a means of communicating. And not everyone who uses words sees words as their primary voice or their primary means of understanding things. . . . Most people seem to miss these facts, and automatically see having a voice as the same as using speech or at least using language.” Baggs’s statement is deceptively simple. On the surface it appears to correspond to the structure of a human rights claim in that Baggs claims that sie too has a voice and deserves, on that basis, to be recognized as human. In this regard, Baggs might seem to confirm the conservative, humanitarian vision of humanity that is grounded in essential characteristics (such as voice) and that progressively includes excluded subjects on the condition that they exhibit these characteristics. However, more careful parsing reveals that Baggs strategically uses human rights discourse to critique the confining form of humanity that humanitarian agents believe they liberate by giving autistics a voice. Baggs’s insistence that autistics who cannot speak already have a voice suggests that what is “given” in such therapeutic interventions is not a voice per se but rather an attunement to the humanitarian—and, by extension, the documentary—conventions of articulate, persuasive speech.

Baggs suggests that we can grasp an alternative, autistic concept of the voice if we disarticulate the voice from language and speech—that is, if we approach the voice from the perspective of those who are thought not to have one in the first place. In so doing, she calls into question one of the most enduring refrains of Western philosophy, dating back to Plato and Aristotle: the belief that humanity abides in the capacity for externalizing interiority through speech. The metaphysical turn in post-Socratic philosophy, as Frances Dyson has noted, was characterized by the imperative to subject the body to a purifying process that would disassociate its corporeality and etherealize its true inner substance: reason. According to this narrative, the voice, or the capacity to produce physical soundings, exists to make meaning, specifically linguistic meaning. This is what is believed to set humans apart from other animals. Animals, Aristotle famously proclaimed, do not have a voice even though they produce sounds, for “voice is a sound with a meaning.” The meaning in question is thought to already reside within the body in the form of a soul, logos, or inner speech, the human bequest of the Word of God; the voice is merely the vehicle by which it may be exteriorized.

The imperative of humans “rising above matter” to achieve reason weighs on the voice in a particular way. In this logoscentric mode of privileging the linguistic content of speech over its social, embodied modes of making meaning, the voice is treated as a “vanishing mediator” whose corporeal content evaporates in the act of utterance. Dolar’s elaboration of this phenomenon is worth quoting at some length for its clear explanation of the paradoxical dualism between mind and body, subjectivity and corporeality, that structures metaphysical thinking. Dolar writes:

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We can make various other sounds with the intention of signifying something, but there the intention is external to those sounds themselves, or they function as a stand-in, a metaphorical substitute for the voice. Only the voice implies a subjectivity which "expresses itself" and itself inhabits the means of expression. But if the voice is thus the quasi-natural bearer of the production of meaning, it also proves to be strangely recalcitrant to it. If we speak in order to "make sense," to signify, to convey something, then the voice is the material support of bringing about meaning, yet it does not contribute to itself. It is, rather, something like the vanishing mediator (to use the terms made famous by Fredric Jameson for a different purpose)—it makes the utterance possible, but it disappears in it, it goes up in smoke in the meaning being produced. Even on the most banal level of daily experience, when we listen to someone speak, we may at first be very much aware of his or her voice and its particular qualities, its color and accent, but soon we accommodate to it and concentrate only on the meaning that is conveyed. The voice itself is like the Wittgensteinian ladder to be discarded when we have successfully climbed to the top—that is, when we have made our ascent to the peak of meaning. The voice is the instrument, the vehicle, the medium, and the meaning is the goal. This gives rise to a spontaneous opposition where voice appears as materiality opposed to the ideality of meaning. The ideality of meaning can emerge only through the materiality of the means, but the means does not seem to contribute to meaning.41

In the philosophical scenario summarized by Dolar, the voice’s sole purpose is as a vehicle for linguistic meaning: as a corporeal, bodily thing, it is both the medium of and an obstacle to the expression of divine speech. Dolar identifies a stance regarding the voice that is not clearly articulated in Jacques Derrida’s famous critique of the metaphysics of presence surrounding the voice. Derrida argues that the metaphysical tradition as a whole is characterized by a phonocentric bias in which the voice covers over the work of the signifier, producing an illusion of self-presence: as a result, speech is privileged over written communication as the ground of unmediated interiority or consciousness. Dolar demurs that Derrida’s discussion of the metaphysical bias and its enduring impact on contemporary humanistic inquiry renders consistent a complex philosophical history in which the voice was not always seen as the ground of presence. On the contrary, in post-Socratic discourses of voice and music, the materiality of the voice has often been understood as a potential threat to presence, sense, and metaphysical consistency.42

With these considerations in mind, Dolar redefines the voice as the counterintuitive, abjected remainder of Western thought’s irrecconcilable investments in the concept of a voice. Dolar proposes that the voice is the nonsignifying element within communication, or "what does not contribute to making sense." The voice, he writes, is "the material element recalcitrant to meaning," "that which cannot be said," "the non-linguistic, the extralinguistic element which enables speech phenomena, but cannot itself be discerned by linguistics."43 This category would then accommodate all of the corporeal soundings that are believed by Aristotle not to have "soul" in them—for instance, vocal qualities like accent, intonation, and timbre; nonverbal expressions like song; and mechanical, involuntary utterances such as coughs, hic-ups, laughter, sighs, breathing, echolalic babbling, and the like—although Dolar argues that even these are captured by language and turned into a mode of the articulate. At the same time, Dolar insists that while the voice is not a linguistic phenomenon, it cannot be situated in the body either. He proposes that while the voice stems from the body, it separates from the body in the manner of a missile; the voice therefore belongs neither to the body nor to the realm of language but remains recalcitrantly alien to both.44

Dolar’s redefinition of a voice as an embodied, communicative comportment that precedes, exceeds, and eludes the confines of linguistic signification dovetails closely with the recent attempts of a number of autistic commentators to articulate how their modes of voicing remain at odds with the faculties of language and speech that contemporary treatments for autism spectrum disorders take as their goal. Baggs, who has written extensively about her experiences with autism, explains, for instance, that her mode of sensory perception consists of perceiving the world as a rich tapestry of patterns in motion. Sie explains that conventional language, which is based on abstract symbolic categories rather than patterns, is fundamentally inadequate for the fluid world of her sensory impressions.45 Baggs writes, "I don’t have many buffers; to me the world comes in in such great detail that it is hard for me to put the easy interpretations on it that most people use; the way they divide it into pieces and make it abstract is foreign to me."46 Here, Baggs refers to the broad range of neurological differences in processing, prioritizing, interpreting, and integrating sensory information from the environment and the body that make it difficult for those on the autistic spectrum to abstract
the body from the environment, and subjects from objects. These differences, Baggs explains, pose particular difficulties when it comes to verbalization, which relies heavily on the faculty of abstraction.

The primatologist Dawn Prince, who was diagnosed with autism only well into adulthood, has similarly written with great insight about her inability to reconcile herself to the arbitrary abstractions of linguistic meaning. She describes her own encounters with language as a concrete, sensory horizon in its own right, where words resist being assigned to specific concepts or situations and instead have an elastic, mimetic potential. Prince explains her own fascination with repeating the word *hippopotamus*, which was capable of absorbing and bequeathing the associations of context and memory wherever she went. This word would bring familiarity and order to overwhelming new sensory situations, investing them with the reassuring associations of her grandmother’s muted makeup colors, the smell of a cedar chest, or the sensation of loved ones nearby. Simultaneously, it would become a receptacle for singling out and collecting new sense impressions, such as the joyful sound and warmth of running bathwater. She writes, “To me, it was a completely valid response when someone asked me, ‘Do you need to go to the bathroom?’ to answer ‘Hippopotamus’.” Language, encountered in this way, is less a medium of communication than a living and malleable medium of existence that joins subjects and environments, and humans with other species—indeed, Prince attributes her ability to commune with animals and plants to this mimetic encounter with language.

Other autistics, including Temple Grandin, have attested to the extraordinary degree of muscular, sensorial, and cognitive focus demanded by listening to and producing meaningful speech. Grandin explains that an attunement to words sometimes requires turning out phatic sensory cues, including the nuances of vocal tone and facial expression to which autistics are presumed to be impervious and which they themselves find difficult to produce.47 Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, an autistic writer and poet who communicates using FC, finds speaking to be profoundly dissociative. He describes speech as a futile process of ordering a bundle of bodily sensations that resist being “zoned” as faculties or organs. The vocal faculty, he writes, is particularly elusive: “autism was making him feel that his voice was a distant substance that was required to be collected and put somewhere inside his throat. But he was unable to find it.”48 Typing or pointing to letters is often preferable, as D. J. Savarese reports. The calming presence of a facilitator assists Savarese in focusing his muscle movements on the act of typing, without which his body flaps and moves uncontrollably in response to the overwhelming sensory detail that comes at and pulls him in all directions.49

Drawing on autistic perspectives such as these, Erin Manning has noted that, unlike neurotypical individuals, autistics are not exclusively attuned to human language or faciality, as the two orienting coordinates of the voice. Autistic perception, she argues, is often immersed in the world as a system of entangled relations that encompass human, nonhuman, organic, and inorganic registers. In this unhierarchized “attunement to life as an incipient ecology of practices” that is constantly in the making, the abstractions involved in language are frequently experienced as an imperative of distilling an infinite melange of sense impressions into the narrow channels of intersubjective relations and signification.50 The body must similarly be subtracted from its exploratory environmental relations, and the vocal channel localized and differentiated from the other organs in order for speech to occur.

For all these “subtractions,” it is undeniable that linguistic forms of communication, such as speaking, writing, typing, and FC, are vital translation tools for autistics—without these mediating forms, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to engage with autistic modes of voicing in the first place. However, the complex capacity of language to shape experience in socially meaningful ways means that the subtraction in question is indeed, Prince asserts, a kind of connective tissue linking different registers and dimensions of experience when it is relieved of its usual signifying functions. Taking both perspectives on language into consideration, Manning proposes that language can be “both more-than and less-than”—it can multiply and foreclose on, add to and subtract from expressive and receptive potential all at once.51

When we approach accounts such as these with Baggs’s statement in mind, we find that they offer nothing less than an autistic counterdiscourse of voicing that complicates the logocentric humanitarian notion of having a voice. From a humanitarian perspective, the autistic dwelling in an infinite field of perceptual and relational possibilities is seen as disabled or trapped. However, when we look at speech from an autistic perspective, it is voicing in the “normal” sense, from which these possibilities have been subtracted, that

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is revealed to be disabled, lacking, closeted, and constrained—it would not be an exaggeration to call it thoroughly autistic. This is what Baggs argues when she proposes that those who respond without hesitation in a recognizable tongue to the humanitarian call to have a voice are confined to a limited conception of humanity.

Baggs, Prince, and other autistic writers are attentive to the mimetic potential activated by the process of communication, before it is subordinated to the confines of sanctioned signifying forms. Their communicative comportment is one in which the affective and physical supports of vocal sounding resist being harnessed as a medium or channel for exteriorizing inner experience but participate instead in an ongoing merger with emerging fields of sensation. What is more, the voice, as autistic interlocutors invoke it, is not restricted narrowly to the production of sonorous soundings through the larynx, diaphragm, and mouth but refers more broadly to a more complex gestural paralanguage that includes some of the common behaviors attributed to autistics, such as staring vacantly, humming, echoing others’ words, swaying, or flapping. As Baggs insists, autistics do communicate, even when they are accused of being uncommunicative (existing in a “world of their own,” “avoiding eye contact,” engaging in “obscene or repetitive” activities) or when their communications are deemed to be failures (nonsensical, socially disruptive). We might propose as an alternative that these communiqués are not antisocial or uncommunicative. They represent an ongoing communion with the world (“an ongoing response to what is around,” to borrow Baggs’s words from “In My Language”) rather than being oriented solely toward a neurotypical human subject. If these communications have an orientation, it is toward an audience that they hope to hail into being in their own image.

The autistic voice, understood in such terms, resonates with Barthes’s notion of the grain of the voice. Barthes describes the grain of the voice as an erotic, prelogical, and corporeal element in communication that exceeds its coded, sanctioned forms of embodiment and signification, or “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue.”50 The autistic voice may seem at first to be at odds with the organicism of Barthes’s concept, for which Barthes has been critiqued. As Grandin astounds, the voices of autistics are frequently perceived as “flat with little inflection and no rhythm,” or lacking in grain, a perception that is further exacerbated when autistics communicate using speech-generating devices that reduce vocalization to a depersonalized mechanical sound.51 In other instances where their vocalization is echolalic, inappropriately pitched, idiosyncratically syntactic, socially disruptive, or stuttering, autistics resemble other minoritarian subjects whose voices are deemed too grainy. Like female voices, transgender voices, racially inflected or regionally accented voices, and the voices of the ill, the aged, and the disturbed, autistic voices are infrequently encountered in mainstream media forms.52 Even in documentary films, which “typically demonstrate a wider variety of accents, dialects, and speech patterns than those found in fiction films,” hyperembodied voices are routinely edited for clarity or subtitled, a measure that according to film historian Jeffrey Ruoff serves to maximize the intelligibility of their speech while minimizing the interference of its grain.53

Transgender filmmaker and artist Wu Tsang expresses her solidarity with these dilemmas of autistic voicing in Shape of a Right Statement, a video from 2008 in which Tsang re-performs the second part of Baggs’s “In My Language.” Tsang faces the camera, dressed plainly in a black top and nude skull cap, framed in front of a shiny silver curtain. The background is as flamboyant as Tsang’s appearance is neutral, its shimmering surface seeming to reflect in turn the lack and excess that simultaneously mark her androgynous body and voice. Tsang repeats Baggs’s “translation” word for word, replicating exactly the mechanical tones, pauses, and speech patterns of Baggs’s electronically generated speech, but without subtitles. Tsang’s face remains perfectly expressionless as she speaks, but the tears welling in her eyes and her occasional sharp intakes of breath betray the tremendous effort involved in her performance. The effect is disorienting. Without subtitles lassoing our attention to Tsang’s words, we are invited to experience the texture and grain of her peculiar vocal delivery. It is as if Tsang attempts to inhabit precisely those registers of voicing that are usually subtracted, cast out, or subordinated in service of intelligibility. In addressing these communiqués to us, she asks us to become the audience with which the autistic voice seeks communion.

The complexities of the autistic voice are further illuminated if we turn to a less commonly cited definition of the grain of the voice. Barthes writes that the grain opens the voice to signification, which he defines elsewhere as “the un-end of possible operations in a given field of a language.” Contrary to signification, signification cannot be reduced, therefore, to communication, representation, expression.54 Barthes also writes that the grain of the voice inheres in “the very precise space . . . of the encounter between a language and a voice.”55 He would seem here to be describing the opening of signification, which has typically been interpreted as a textual encounter, whereby the reader or lis-
tener attempting to master language is ultimately undone by the slippage and slide of the signifier that perpetually defers the stabilization of meaning. But when we consider the aforementioned quote in conjunction with Barthes’s evocation of the grain as the materiality of the body, we are able to envision significance in a different register, as a *temporal* encounter between corporeal and linguistic materialities. To rephrase Barthes, we might say that significance emerges in the existential interval between the plane of enunciation and the plane in which it is bounded and given shape as communication.

Reading Barthes’s grain of the voice against its grain, as it were, we can focus on its temporal movement rather than its binary operation. This broadens our perspective beyond Barthes’s own preferred example of song, turning his essay into an invitation to experience all vocalization, including speech, nonteleologically, from the perspective of the voice as voice, rather than retrospectively from the perspective of language.” Reconfigured in this manner, the grain of the voice offers a means of understanding the temporal, durational dimension of communication implied in the autistic counterdiscourse of the voice. The opening of significance provides a vocabulary for what writers like Mukhopadhyay, Baggs, Prince, and Rubin gesture to as the awakening of the body to communication — one that is experienced as a temporary suspension that diffuses the body in the environment before it must be gathered up and localized in the service of articulate speech (Mukhopadhyay’s account of having to “collect” and put his voice in his throat is a vivid reminder). Thus, the grain as significance invokes those dimensions of vocalization that do not culminate in the destination of intelligible speech.

Returning to Baggs’s statement that “not everyone who uses words sees words as their primary voice or their primary means of understanding things,” one can locate the “primary voice” to which she refers in this suspended time of communicative potential. The writings of Baggs and others, in conversation with Barthes and Dolar, enable us to see that the autistic voice does not belong exclusively to autistic individuals but is a spectral presence in *all* speech. The conditions of possibility of its emergence can now be understood in terms of the extent to which the conventions of voicing remain open to what we might, following Dolar and Barthes, call the nonsignifying element within communication, or the interval of significance.

**Reassessing the Voice of Documentary**

The autistic counterdiscourse of voicing that I have laid out has implications for the study of documentary that go beyond the specific representational challenges of autism. At a more general level, the concept of the autistic voice urges us to revisit the role of the speaking voice as documentary’s defining formal feature as well as the central metaphor of documentary studies. Document was once defined by Bill Nichols as a “discourse of sobriety” motivated by rhetorical rather than aesthetic goals and, hence, a genre organized around the spoken word rather than the image. Although it is now widely agreed that the horizons of the documentary genre have far exceeded these narrow interventionist parameters (Nichols has since rescinded his definition of documentary as a sober rhetorical genre), documentary scholars continue to reference Nichols’s use of voice as a metaphor for the implied worldview or perspective of a documentary film, as well as a literal measure of the genre’s inclusion of the perspectives of previously disenfranchised or voiceless subjects. For instance, a number of documentary critics, from Michael Renov to Catherine Russell, regard the emergence of documentary films featuring first-person vocal commentary (often by minoritarian subjects) as evidence of the genre’s progression from an objective voice or worldview to one that is more reflexive and inclusive.

I argue that the seemingly innocuous metaphor of “the voice of documentary” can be seen as an indication of the enduring logocentric — and, by extension, humanitarian — investments of documentary studies in the speaking voice as a measure of humanity. The attention of autistic interlocutors like Baggs to the paralinguistic, embodied dimensions of voicing allows us to read these investments against their grain. Specifically, I propose that concept of the autistic voice activates a minor, feminist, register of Nichols’s analysis of the voice of documentary. Whereas Nichols traces documentary’s progressive evolution from totalitarian and univocal modes toward polyvocal and thus more inclusive modes of voicing, the autistic voice comments on how the reality effects of documentary are bound up with the documentary tropes of persuasive speech, and raises questions regarding the narrative of documentary’s reflexive progress toward polyvocality. These questions also pertain to recent documentary scholarship on the first-person voice-over. Using my readings of the voice-overs in “I Am Autism,” *Autism Is a World*, and “In My Language,” I examine how the autistic voice can potentially unground
the humanity that this vocal trope tacitly authenticates, and point toward its "regressive" openings.

In my introductory chapter, I noted that Grierson, writing in 1942, located the generic specificity of documentary in its "anti-aesthetic" vocation. Grierson is also known for pioneering the use of expository voice-over commentary, a technique of narration derided by fiction filmmakers as the "last resort of the incompetent" for its violation of cherished ideals regarding the visual focus and invisible discourse of film. Grierson’s promotion of this technique reflected an intuitive understanding of how the metaphysical attunement to the speaking voice as a bearer of linguistic meaning—rather than an embodied obstacle to its intelligibility—could be combined with the architeconics of documentary to achieve the rhetorical effect of immediacy. The "I Am Autism" video offers an excellent illustration of how expository voice-over narration functions as the quintessential "vanishing mediator," to quote Dolar’s description of how voice is treated in the metaphysical tradition. The emanation of this disembodied voice from off-screen has the effect of "rising above" other sounds and images beneath it in the audiovisual hierarchy, as well as its own source, materiality, and embodiment, to forcefully assert its message.

Over half a century later, in his magisterial study of documentary, Representing Reality (1991), Nichols reframes Grierson’s innate grasp of this metaphysical principle of voicing as a hypothesis regarding the pivotal role of the speaking voice in documentary’s reality effects. Nichols claims that documentary’s distinctive stylistic features emerge from its rhetorical motivations as a "discourse of sobriety" aiming to persuade spectators of the authenticity and credibility of its claims regarding social reality. Documentary films, Nichols proposes, are organized around an "informing logic" requiring a "representation, case, or argument about the historical world." Since "arguments require a logic that words are able to bear far more easily than images," Nichols infers that the onus of documentary’s representational burden rests on the sound track rather than the image, and specifically on speech. He notes that "commentary by voice-over narrators, reporters, interviewees, and other social actors figure strongly in most documentary." In linking documentary with the oratory arts of persuasive speaking more than with the visual arts of composition and montage, Nichols highlights the rhetorical efficiency of the speaking voice in collapsing the ideological distance between text and spectator. His point is that documentary works on its audience through voices that explicitly (e.g., voice-over exposition) or implicitly (e.g., interview footage) argue its stance. Thus, the film invites an unspoken "yes" in response to the question it poses: "This is so, isn’t it?" He writes that in those instances where documentary aims to mobilize its "indexical relation to the historical world" in support of factual claims, speech "adds flesh to fact," behaving as the material supplement by means of which the mute facticity of audiovisual evidence is shot through with social meaning and made credible.

Nichols’s account of documentary speech closely parallels Dolar’s account of the spontaneous opposition between the materiality of voice and the ideality of meaning in the Western, logocentric tradition (“The ideality of meaning can emerge only through the materiality of the means, but the means does not seem to contribute to meaning”). In other words, the reality effects of documentary—that is, its authority, credibility, and persuasiveness—depend on its success in subordinating the "flesh" of documentary speech (its grain, or significance) in service of its rhetorical aims. When approached through the concept of the autistic voice, Nichols’s ideas offer a suggestive commentary on how the rhetorical immediacy of documentary is achieved by both mobilizing and disavowing those registers of voicing that might potentially destabilize its intended meaning. Indeed, it would seem as though Nichols were referring to the ways in which the vanishing materiality of the speaking voice inspires documentary’s reality effects when he employs the voice of documentary as a metaphor for the unique perspective or worldview of every documentary film.

This metaphor receives its most substantial elaboration in Nichols’s essay “The Voice of Documentary,” which predates Representing Reality by a few years. In a frequently cited passage from this essay, Nichols writes, “By ‘voice’ I mean something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text’s social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us. In this sense, ‘voice’ is not restricted to any one code or feature such as dialogue or spoken commentary. Voice is perhaps akin to that intangible, moiré-like pattern formed by the unique interaction of all a film’s codes, and it applies to all modes of documentary.” Intriguingly, Nichols disavows any privileged connection between the voice of documentary and the documentary tropes of persuasive speech when he writes that voice is not restricted simply to dialogue or spoken commentary. In the second edition of his textbook Introduction to Documentary, published
in 2010, Nichols employs speech as a general signifier of documentary’s expressive possibilities, writing that the “voice of documentary speaks with all the means available to its maker.” In other words, documentary “speech” encompasses not only literal speech but every possible enunciative choice regarding the relationships between sounds and images (composition, selection, arrangement, inclusion, exclusion, mode of narration) through which a documentary can make convincing truth claims. Or, as Nichols explains in his 1983 essay, “we may think we hear history or reality speaking to us through a film, but what we actually hear is the voice of the text, even when that voice tries to efface itself.”

Nichols’s use of voice as a metaphor for the elusive element that both holds together the message of a documentary and disappears in the act of its utterance insists on the very connection between voice and speech that he disavows. Voice has immense critical potential as a metaphor that identifies an enduring logocentric tendency in the genre’s approach to mediation, especially in those instances where those who are represented by documentary appear to “speak for themselves.” It is striking, therefore, that “The Voice of Documentary” argues the opposite. This essay identifies a series of roughly chronological documentary modes that progressively democratize and undermine the truth claims of the Griersonian expository mode through a more complex and inclusive distribution of voices and modes of address. These include an observational mode that eschews voice-over commentary in favor of social actors speaking indirectly among themselves, an interactive mode in which interviewees step up to the camera to report their testimony or engage in a dialogue with the filmmaker, and a reflexive mode of documentary that is self-conscious regarding the effects of its chosen modes of vocalization. Nichols has since updated this list to include a performative mode that typically involves a highly subjective voice-over and a poetic mode that avoids speech altogether.

Some critics, like Stella Bruzzi, have criticized Nichols’s genealogy of the evolving modes of documentary as an overly linear and schematic “family tree.” Since the publication of the first edition of her book New Documentary in 2000, Bruzzi has been a vocal critic of Nichols’s chronology of the various modes of documentary, which she argues produces false dichotomies between ideologically regressive and progressive documentary approaches based on films that share formal features. However, Nichols’s account of documentary’s departure from its sober, rhetorical origins remains a gravi-
that employs strategies such as irony, unreliability, contradiction, digression, and contrapuntality. As Russell notes, the voice-over remains the primary site of these deconstructions, even though they can also be expressed through the look of the camera or the image. Not only does this type of first-person voice-over offer an economical means of centering the perspective of formerly marginalized or unacknowledged subjectivities—a politically reflexive act—but its formally reflexive mode of exposition means that the speaking subject is problematized as fragmented, multiple, incoherent, split, and, perhaps most important, relational. As Lebow writes, autobiographical film implicates others in its quest to represent a self, implicitly constructing a subject always already in-relation—that is, in the first person plural. As psychoanalysis teaches, and as others such as Emmanuel Levinas and Judith Butler have argued, the self is always a relational matter, never conceivable in isolation. First-person film merely literalizes and makes apparent the fact that self-narration—not to mention autobiography—is never the sole property of the speaking self. It properly belongs to larger collectivities without which the maker would be unrecognizable to herself, and effectively would have no story to tell.

To sum up, the reflexive first-person voice-over is widely regarded as a transgressive convention that not only grapples with who has the right to speak in documentary but also dismantles cultural preconceptions regarding the so-called voice or worldview of a given documentary film. The concept of the autistic voice pinpoints what remains underinterrogated in these accounts: the logocentrism of the first-person voice-over. If first-person film makes it apparent that “the self is always a relational matter,” as Lebow argues, then the autistic voice argues that the subjectivity designated by the first-person pronoun—a linguistic designation of personhood—is necessarily constituted in relation to a linguistic collectivity. Whereas relationality, in this discourse, is more or less equivalent with interpersonal or interhuman relationality, the autistic voice joins feminist film critics like Trinh and Peckham in foregrounding the seemingly impersonal, inhuman, and regressive relationalities that escape such linguistic designations. The unspoken associations of the first-person voice-over with realist concepts such as honesty, truth, or stable interiority have already been successfully deconstructed. By adding interhuman relationality to the list of these realist concepts, the autistic voice urges documentary studies to re-examine its benchmarks of representational progress: it shows that even though documentary has seemingly been acquitted of its representational realism, a more entrenched form of realism inheres in the genre’s insistent use of pronominal verbalization to demonstrate that “a human being is present.”

The capacity of the first-person voice-over to reinforce interhuman relationality can be understood as an extension of the principle that Chion dubs vococentrism: a speaking voice, Chion argues, commands attention over other sounds, much as a human face is accorded a special privilege over other images. The first-person voice-over similarly rises above the other audiovisual elements of documentary speech—including those nonverbal but nonetheless communicative and relational elements that I have described as the autistic voice—when it comes to the voice of documentary. We can witness this principle in action in the expository first-person voice-over of “I Am Autism” as well as in the interventionist first-person voice-over in Autism Is a World. In “I Am Autism,” we see faces and hear an acousmatic voice speaking in the first person. But because the listless, silent, and unresponsive faces of autistic children are coded as nonfaces, and thus nonrelational, the acousmatic voice stands in as an implied human presence, even as it paradoxically speaks from the inhuman perspective of the “disease” of autism. The interpellative power of such an expository speaking voice is not simply a function of its place in the audiovisual hierarchy, as effected through a set of technical manipulations such as sound design, volume, and editing; it is also linked to its use of the first-person pronoun to constitute its subjectivity in relation to a logocentric human collectivity, with which the audience is invited to identify.

The relationship between the Rubin we hear in Margulies’s first-person voice-over and the Rubin we see struggling with autism in Wurzburg’s Autism Is a World clarifies that the relational bonds of this collectivity are defined by the exclusion of the nonverbal, “nonrelational” autistic. This relationship is not unlike that which exists between the voice of autism and the faces of autistic children in “I Am Autism.” The Rubin who addresses us in the first person in Margulies’s soft, mellifluous voice using unbroken, perfect English assumes the status of a subject, speaking about that abjected part of herself that suffers from “awful autism” as an object to be observed, described, and overcome. Even though the source of Margulies’s voice-over is unseen, the quality of her voice conjures the mental image of a correspondingly coherent, able, feminine body that stands in as the absent “face” of the film and entreats our identification. The first-person voice-over comfortably claims the status
of the film’s voice, whereas this category and the humanity it connotes never seem appropriate to the incoherent sounds that pitch forth from Rubin’s on-screen body.

Baggs’s electronically generated first-person voice-over, on the other hand, suggests that the autistic voice is precisely what must be jettisoned from the speaking voice in order to evidence a recognizable mode of personhood. Hir use of this trope seems to exemplify the kind of reflexivity described by Rascaroli, Russell, Lebow, and others, in that Baggs’s commentary self-consciously thematizes its own self-evidently positive value as a marker of humanity, interiority, and relational capacity. The difference is that Baggs critiques the epistemic limits of the first-person voice-over at a level that is rarely questioned: she calls out the thoroughly limiting interhuman relationality that a speaking voice, particularly one speaking about itself, is thought to activate. Even as Baggs’s words make a claim on behalf of hir humanity in the “translation,” they also demonstrate how hir promiscuous mode of interacting with the world in the first part of the video is both activated by and paradoxically confined by the logocentric communicative logic of the first-person voice-over. In this way, Baggs urges us to consider the modes of communication, relationality, and representation that remain in the shadows of this convention as the starting point for an autistic approach to political and formal reflexivity in documentary. Baggs’s use of the first-person voice-over to undermine the meaning of “coming to voice” returns us to Nichols’s claim that speech makes documentary’s truth claims credible. If a (speaking) voice is that elusive something that coheres documentary’s disparate elements into a single overarching perspective that invites the spectator’s tacit identification and approval, then the autistic voice, Baggs suggests, must be the dizzying multiplication and kaleidoscoping of that perspective.

**Toward an Autistic Discourse on Humanitarianism**

Thus far, I have considered the dynamics between three different types of voices speaking for autism as they pertain to the politics of documentary representation. I now expand my purview to address how these voices also animate the broader discursive history of autism. My analysis is guided by a reading of Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, a book whose philosophical engagement with the prehistory of Western attitudes toward disability also offers a compelling commentary on what it means to produce an autistic discourse on humanitarianism.

The connections between autism and Foucault are far from accidental. Foucault’s work on the institutional and discursive formations that have named and defined medical disorders (such as the asylum, psychiatric science, and the medical gaze) has been instrumental in shaping the field of sociological studies of science and technology, from which some of the most enabling contributions to contemporary research on autism have emerged. However, the more philosophical questions raised by Foucault regarding the outcasting of “unreason” from the space of Western civilization have not yet been substantially taken up in relation to autism. I turn now to these questions in order to tease out the stakes of the various claims regarding interiority and exteriority, confinement and emancipation, that animate contemporary medical as well as media interventions around autism. The exercise of mapping the discursive history of autism also allows me to unearth the often contradictory and ambivalent threads of Foucault’s own ideas in this early book on the workings of power and subjection.

My proposal is that my three examples of documentary voices speaking for autism map more generally onto contemporary debates regarding autism in fields as wide-ranging as medicine, science and technology studies, and critical disability studies. In practice, these voices are thoroughly entangled and overdetermined, and the contentious status of autism means that any effort to schematize the positions it engenders can only fall short. The central facts about autism about which there is consensus, as many scholars note, are that we don’t yet know much about it at all and that no two autistics are exactly alike. As Chloe Silverman notes, various interest groups remain in heated dispute as to how the existing empirical evidence about autism should be mobilized: for example, some (but not all) autistic self-advocates see the search for a cure as devaluing their own unique abilities, while psychologists use autism as a platform for constructing theories of cognition, and parent-advocates seek resources to pursue innovative therapies or genetic research. Still, the clarity gained from describing the function of the three main voices that weave through these variegated positions makes this a worthwhile exercise.

The first voice (I will call this the dominant voice) emerges from the compulsion, mandated by the emergence of modern industrial capitalism, to envision the healthy, able-bodied, and able-minded individual capable of work as the norm of the human. This voice has its counterparts in the voices of the white man, the colonizer, the heterosexual, the anthropologist, and so
on. Looking back at the previous chapters, we can locate the voice of the photojournalist, and the traditional voice of the television news anchor, as described by Margaret Morse, as iterations of this subject position. In the video “I Am Autism,” the dominant voice is the humanitarian voice speaking in the guise of autism in a didactic expository voice-over. Fabian identifies the epistemological hypocrisy involved in such speech: the dominant voice speaks objectively about otherness while effacing its own subject position. This self-effacement authorizes the dominant voice to describe autism in positive terms as a psychological disorder, a behavioral deficit in empathy or relational capacity, a neurological disability, or a genetic disease. Autism has been treated alternately in all of these ways since Kanner’s pioneering research in 1943, but the common denominator lies in its coding as a lack requiring correction. As previously noted, “impairment” has been a consistent theme in the ever-evolving diagnostic classification of autism.

Much of the contemporary critical literature on autism refers to this dominant voice as the “deficit” or “medical” model of thinking about autism. This voice is analogous to the voice of “scientific reason,” whose development Foucault traces through the classical-era precursors of the nineteenth-century mental asylum. One of Foucault’s most well-received insights in Madness and Civilization is that the voice of medicine, speaking at once in the eternal tones of the Father, Judge, Family, and Law, tells us more about its own genealogies and norms than about the object (the patient) that it seeks to define as a deviation from these norms. Along these lines, Amit Pinchevski argues that autism has attracted a disproportionate amount of scientific attention relative to its incidence because, as “a paradigmatic case of arrest in communication, socialization and development, and as the ultimate impasse, it constitutes the antipode against which the medical-scientific discourse measures its rational tools for accessing another mind.”

Foucault seeks to re-create the negative content of the positivist medical voice by paying attention to its economic, legal, and moral conditions of possibility. The current surge of social constructivist approaches to the study of autism consistently adopt an archaeological reading of Foucault that attends to the discursive architectonics shaping medical statements at different historical moments. Ian Hacking’s work is a direct application of this strain in Foucault’s thinking. Hacking’s concept of the “looping effect,” or the mutual shaping between classificatory categories and the behaviors, norms, and self-identifications of autistic individuals, has become a foundational critical standpoint from which to regard the “autism epidemic.”16 Autism Speaks’s campaign is just one example of the popular use of this sensationalist phrase to emphasize the dramatic rise in the incidence of autism from one in two thousand in the 1970s to one in a hundred at the time of writing of this chapter. This increase in incidence is frequently explained in naturalistic terms that evidence the enduring force of the positivist medical voice: explanations include bad parenting by “refrigerator mothers,” metabolic imbalances, environmental toxins, vaccines, weather-related phenomena, television watching, and, more recently, neurobiological or genetic factors.

Hacking’s work has been immensely influential in dissipating the popular, sensationalist preoccupations with autism and situating its emergence as a diagnostic category within a broad series of discursive transformations that together comprise what Foucault has called the biopoliticization and medicalization of life. A number of scholars have followed Hacking’s lead, arguing that the so-called autism epidemic needs to be understood in light of mutually informing transformations in the scientific, technological, institutional, and social realms. Several studies have racked focus from the so-called deficits of autism to this discursive background, attending to phenomena ranging from the deinstitutionalization of mental retardation, to the broadening of diagnostic criteria to assess the condition as a spectrum, to improvements in medical technology, to increased knowledge and awareness of autism in medical and lay spheres. Others focus on social aspects of the discursive matrix that shapes the autistic spectrum as a target in motion, including shifts in the status and social organization of expertise, the affective role of parents and communities of care, the growing influence of the self-advocacy movement, and the generic forms and conventions of depicting autism, including “conversion” or “recovery” narratives and stereotypes of savantism and dependency.

Even as they acknowledge the immense value of these social constructivist interventions, some scholars argue that this approach reinforces a worldview in which the autistic person is seen as a passive receptacle of discursive forces. This critique, which is often leveled directly at Foucault, misses some of the finer points of Foucault’s analysis that tackle the difficult question of how to make unreason speak without destroying it. We can elaborate on these points by attending to a second, “resistant” voice that speaks out against the humanitarian deployment of the dominant voice by appropriating its techniques of legitimation. Zana Briski in chapter 1, Tia Lessin and Carl Deal in

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chapter 2, and Wurzburg in this chapter all attempt to enable such a voice to “speak out.” Rubin’s appropriation of the authority associated with a didactic, expository documentary voice-over to assert her own autistic perspective using an interventionist first-person voice-over is an example of this kind of resistant voice. Kimberly Roberts’s harnessing of the testimonial codes of liveness and Briski’s students’ use of the humanitarian aesthetic of innocence are other examples.

Robert McRuer’s seminal work in critical disability studies articulates the complexities of this appropriative mode of resisting the dominant mode of power. McRuer argues that the regime of able-bodiedness, that is, the dominant voice against which autistic critics have spoken out, “still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things,” even more so than its counterpart, heterosexuality.58 McRuer contends that this order was organized until recently by a dialectic of visibility, whereby the invisible influence of the dominant identity was maintained by spectacularizing its others as pathological. The retrograde audiovisual politics of “I Am Autism” exemplify this waning representational regime, in which the normative status of the vocal, articulate speaking subject is tacitly reinforced by the visible and audible pathologization of the nonverbal autistic body. McRuer argues that the rigid binary between normality and pathology has become flexible and supple in our postmodern, neoliberalized climate, in which the boundary line between the two is perpetually redrawn to reflect the changing patterns of tolerance. The result, he explains, is new techniques of exclusion: “Neoliberalism and the condition of postmodernity, in fact, increasingly need able-bodied, heterosexual subjects who are visibly and spectacularly tolerant of queer/disabled existences.”54 “In many cultural representations, disabled, queer figures no longer embody absolute deviance but are still visually and narratively subordinated, and sometimes they are eliminated outright (or perhaps—in the flexible new parlance—laid off). Flexibility again works both ways: heterosexual, able-bodied characters in such texts work with queer and disabled minorities, flexibly contracting and expanding, while queer and disabled minorities flexibly comply.”55

McRuer points out that under neoliberalism, the exclusion of disabled minorities need not take the form of outright exclusion: instead, the inclusion or tolerance of difference can serve to successfully maintain dominant identities. The increasing visibility of autistics in Hollywood films is an example of this strategy at work. Stuart Murray notes that an increasing number of

fiction films feature autistic characters but that the inclusion of these characters frequently serves as a means of centering a neurotypical protagonist: the disabled character animates and enables the narrative trajectory of the (usually able-bodied) protagonist, either by providing savant-like assistance in the dilemma at hand or by serving as an emotional enigma that the protagonist must work through.56 McRuer’s point is that visibility or inclusion is not necessarily a viable strategy of resistance in such a context, since visibility is often the currency on which the dominant order thrives in the first place.

Thus, McRuer’s analysis brings a certain complexity to the existential efforts of disabled individuals who desire access, agency, and visibility, while simultaneously critiquing the normative ideals of ability associated with such agency. He describes the political work of speaking out against normative notions of ability as “coming out cripp”: a practice that “at times involves embracing and at times disidentifying with the most familiar kinds of identity politics.”57 This idea builds on the queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of disidentification, which refers to the survival strategies available to minority subjects when navigating a phobic majoritarian sphere that punishes abnormality. For Muñoz too it is imperative that the minoritarian agent remain flexible in order to parry the fluctuating modalities of neoliberal power; he therefore describes disidentification as a series of counteridentificatory performative actions that mimic the mechanisms and tropes of power (such as, in our case, the dominant humanitarian voice) but with a difference, through practices of recycling, reformating, reappropriating, remaking, repossessing, and mutating.58 The growing intersection of queer and disability studies therefore conceives of the second, resistant voice as one that reflexively emulates the flexible structure of neoliberal power as a strategic mode of improving highly asymmetrical power relations.

The geometric (rather than archaeological) logics in Foucault’s thinking about madness and reason usefully illuminate the present discussion of asymmetry and symmetry in “coming out cripp”—especially the movement from interiority to exteriority implied by this concept. Michel Serres, one of Foucault’s most discerning commentators, parses these logics as follows, in a dense but rich paragraph about Foucault’s history of madness: “Far from being a chronic, the history of madness is a history of the variation of dual structures . . . located in the two spaces of reason and nonsense . . . structures of separation, of relation, of fusion, of opening up, of foundation, of rejection, of reciprocity, of exclusion, or even of ‘nourishment’—in short, all the
structures imaginable and imagined, more or less unconsciously, in history, in this double unity, including the unending circle that allows moving from one domain into the other without interruption.” Serres is referring to Foucault’s narration of the loss of madness as a voice in dialogue with reason as a series of epistemic breaks that variably closed, opened, or connected these two spaces. McRuer performs a similar type of maneuver when he deconstructs the strict binary between able-bodiedness and disability by reconceptualizing the hierarchical and static relation between normal and impaired bodies as one of interdependency and mutuality. He extends Butler’s critique of heterosexuality as an “inevitable comedy” — a position that is impossible to fully inhabit — to the norm of able-bodiedness, by showing that no body operates at peak capacity.

The Butlerian (or Foucauldian) maneuver in disability studies critique is enabling precisely because it permits a counterintuitive analysis of the dominant regime (in this case, the regime of able-bodiedness) as one that is crippled by its own compulsory and delusional exclusions. This is also the point of Serres’s analysis of Foucault’s history of madness. Serres shows that in every case where a line of exclusion is drawn — for instance, during the large-scale internment of the mad alongside other social “degenerates” across western Europe in the second half of the seventeenth century, or, subsequently, the practice of sequestering the mad from criminals in the eighteenth century — there is a regulatory logic at work on both sides of the line. One side protects, and the other excludes, but not necessarily in the manner that is apparent. In the latter instance of separating the mad from criminals as a humanitarian measure, it is the prisoners who are protected from the mad and not the other way around. “The pseudoliberation,” Serres writes, “always hides a more obscure and more real enclosure.” This leads him to conjecture that the “liberation” of madness is not exempt from a coercive regulatory logic in which the essence of madness is always located in what is ultimately excluded in a process of ongoing epistemological clarification.

Serres’s intervention protests the usual relegation of Foucault’s history of madness as an early account of power operating purely through exclusion and repression — a position Foucault is thought to have revised in his later works. It also points to a central contradiction in the discourse among autistic self-advocates, where a common complaint and self-reproach is that the voices speaking out against the pathologization of autism are those of the vocal, “high-functioning” autistics, and not nonverbal autistics with serious

disabilities. The subtext is always that the real, authentic voice of autism has not yet been heard and that further intervention is required to draw out its subjugated interiority. With each protest of this kind, the ostensible spectrality of disability represented by the resistant voice divides and subdivides into a structure that looks ever inward in search of its essential, excluded core. The “resistant” voice thus subscribes to a repressive hypothesis regarding power; it interprets McRuer’s proposal that disabled individuals should “come outcrip” as a call to liberate this excluded core, whereas McRuer’s larger point that there is no “core,” since identities are performatively (de-) constituted. Serres’s conjecture regarding the so-called essence of madness identifies the aporia at the heart of this view of disability: the resistant or “crip” voice is to the norm of able-bodiedness, by showing that no body operates at peak capacity.

We can, finally, detect a third, autistic, voice that is attentive to the gridlock existing between the first two voices, in which the resistant voice is thought to represent the ever-elusive content abjected and excluded by the dominant voice. We can glimpse this third voice in Baggs’s “In My Language.” Baggs disidentifies with the dominant notion of the human and stages a performative “coming out” of sorts, but she goes the extra step of acknowledging the confinement that paradoxically awaits her resisting voice. The two halves of Baggs’s video beautifully illustrate this point. The first half of the video, which demonstrates an autistic mode of voicing, unfolds on its own terms. However, when Baggs grafts the explanatory commentary, or “translation,” of the first-person voice-over onto this material in the second half of the video, the previous part of the video becomes retrospectively coded as autistic in relation to the “normal” mode of communication of the voice-over. Baggs brilliantly uses the content of her voice-over to comment on the impoverishment of this normative documentary convention of “having a voice” in relation to those grainy, autistic registers of communication that it excludes and disavows. Her choice of the first-person voice-over as the vehicle of this critique suggests that the documentary tropes of immediation used to give a voice to disenfranchised social subjects should be seen as a discursive closet or trap, rather than a path to liberation.

Baggs’s video makes explicit the ironic commentary that is embedded in the pensive, erotic photographs analyzed in chapter 1 and in Roberts’s cynical mobilization of liveness in chapter 2. The dominant, humanitarian per-
spective, which is attuned to normative human language, relationality, and voicing, sees the autistic, dwelling in an infinite field of perceptual and relational possibilities, as disabled, trapped, or lacking in relational capacity. Baggs’s video reveals that it is not the autistic but the humanity that is sought for by humanitarian agents in the form of a resisting, articulate speaking voice that is limited, locked up, and confined—and in fact thoroughly autistic. This astonishing reversal is an extension of Serres’s commentary on “pseudoliberation.” Serres explains this reversal in terms of the way reason is limited by the exclusion of unreason: “for there to be clarification, analysis, and differentiation of unreason, for this differentiation to lead to an image of the rational, implies, all of a sudden, that one has to define, in their turn, both reason and norm. And, suddenly, it is they who are going to appear insulated and limited. Lock up madness behind a gate, but understand, in so doing, that you limit reason.”

If Baggs responds to Foucault’s attempts to articulate what Serres calls “a discourse of unreason on reason”—or, apropos this chapter, to articulate an autistic discourse on humanitarianism—it is by acknowledging that an autistic voice can only be articulated within and against the confines of im medial conditions that are thoroughly compromised. But she also issues the following, challenging questions: What would mean to free documentary to inhabit an autistic voice? To what forms of mediation must we become accustomed in order to be able to hear and interpret these mute communications? These are questions that I take up further in the next and final chapter.

ing the transparency of human rights testimonies, arguing that the attachment of humanitarian advocates to the medial conventions of journalistic realism prevents them from fully engaging media as a constitutive element of their political and identitarian goals. See McLagan, “Human Rights,” 304–9.

85. Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 200. Also see chapter 4.
86. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze explain that this is “why, despite so many painstaking attempts to inclusion, certain populations nevertheless seem permanently incapable of achieving flourishing lives within those institutions.” “Introduction,” 19.

Chapter 3: “Having a Voice”

1. A chronicle of the autistic community’s objections to this video can be found in Biever, “‘Poetic’ Autistic Film.” Autism Speaks’s response to these objections is noted in Wallis, “‘I Am Autism.”
2. See N’Eman, “Disability Community Condemns.”
3. See Biever, “Voices of Autism ‘Silenced.’” Others have criticized Autism Speaks’s ultimate goal is to cure autism and create a world where Autistic people like myself no longer exist. Most Autistic adults and youth strongly oppose the idea of “curing” ourselves because we do not believe that we are defective, broken, diseased, or in need of being fixed. Having a disability does not mean that there is something wrong with us. Yet because Autism Speaks does not represent Autistic people or speak for us, they can put their efforts into looking for something that most of us do not want. This includes Autistic people who are visibly disabled, severely disabled, and non-speaking, as well as Autistic people who do
not present as very disabled. . . . The majority of people do not know that there is such controversy with Autism Speaks because most people assume that any organization dealing with autism must be doing good things for the community.

10. See Schalk, “Metaphorically Speaking.”
11. Fabian, Time and the Other, 91.
12. By denial of coevalness, Fabian means “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse.” Time and the Other, 31.
14. Quote from Baggs’s video “In My Language.” Baggs describes herself as genderless and uses the pronominal forms sie, hir, and hirs. See Baggs, “Glossary.” Baggs has published under the names Amanda Baggs and Amanda Melissa Baggs, but has formally changed her name to Amelia Evelyn Voicy Baggs, and refers to herself as Mel Baggs. I follow this nomenclature.
15. See the video “I Am Autism Speaks (Now with Added Sub-titles)” on YouTube.
21. Although I cannot explore this connection in this chapter, the normalizing cultural logic through which this purposeful, opinionated voice eradicates other voices that might detract from its purpose might also be productively analyzed in terms of the notion of compression, as elaborated by Jonathan Sterne. Sterne has argued that postmodern media forms tend to operate not through fidelity but through compression. His main example, the MP3, works by discarding sonic material that cannot be detected by the human ear and is therefore deemed irrelevant or extraneous—but it gains through the very process of compression an enhanced and pared-down intelligibility. See Sterne, MP3, 1–3.
22. Charles Wolfe, “‘Voice of God,”’ 151. Wolfe argues that “Voice of God” narration of the prototypical variety associated with The March of Time is a myth in two senses: (1) such narration did not have the desired mythical effect on the listener, and (2) more often than not, even classical documentaries that employed off-screen vocal narration tended to complicate and experiment with its omniscient and omnipotent qualities.
23. Disability studies scholar Jessica Evans has argued in this regard that disability and childhood are both employed interchangeably as coded ciphers of dependency in the visual culture of charity. See Evans, “Making Up Disabled People.”
24. Quote from Jam Jar.
26. Lebow, First Person Jewish, xxiii.
27. Bissonnette and Williams, the protagonists of My Classic Life and Jam Jar, employ different metaphors to articulate how communication therapies have molded their perceptions of space and time in socially meaningful ways: Bissonnette describes the touch-based method of FC as a “potholder” or “ladle of doing language meaningfully” that allows him to collect and order his “spatial awareness.” Williams, who has written several autobiographical texts about living with autism, explains that she could not understand her own actions until she “automatically,” compulsively, wrote about them and “listened” to the pages of her books as they talked to her. Here, Williams gestures to the capacity of narrative forms for ordering and working through everyday experience: while Williams favors linguistic forms, painting helps Bissonnette to “frame,” “order,” and “clear up mysteries.”
28. See Cartwright, Moral Spectatorship, 7–9, and chap. 3 (“A Child Is Being Beaten”: Disorders of Authorship, Agency, and Affect in Facilitated Communication”). Also see Engber’s “Anna Stubblefield,” which recounts a recent criminal case that has contributed to the controversies surrounding FC techniques.
29. These descriptions of Margulies’s voice work, by Wurzburg’s production company, State of the Art, can be seen in numerous news articles about Autism Is a World. See “Autism Is a World Nominated.”
30. See Marks, Skin of the Film. Marks’s concept of “haptic visuality” is discussed at length in chapter 4.
31. Trinh describes her commitment to a form of “speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it.” Trinh, “‘Speaking Nearby,’” 87.
32. See, for instance, Trinh, “Mechanical Eye.”
33. See Peckham, “Not Speaking with Language,” 183; 186. Also see Armatage, “About to Speak.”
34. A number of recent books offer contextually rich accounts of historical phases and approaches in the diagnostic history of autism. Chapters 1 and 2 of Chloe Silverman’s Understanding Autism offer an informative and nuanced reading of the pioneers in autism research, including Kanner and Asperger, as well as the impacts and controversies around Bruno Bettelheim’s psychoanalytic approach. Gil Eyal, Brendan Hart, Emine Oncular, Neta Oren, and Natasha Ross’s The Autism Matrix offers a wide-ranging account of behavioral therapies involving parents and autistics in active roles in the aftermath of the deinstitutionalization of mental retardation in the 1960s and onward (see chaps. 4, 5, 7, and 8), while Majia Holmer Nadesan pays particular attention to the emergence of cognitive and biogeneticist paradigms (see chaps. 5 and 6 in Nadesan, Constructing Autism).
35. The American Psychiatric Association also explains the nature and significance of the revised diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders; see American Psychiatric Association, Autism Spectrum Disorders.”
36. Contemporary behavioral, developmental, occupational, psychopharmacological,
and neurological treatment approaches to autism in the past fifteen years are re-
viewed in numerous recent books, many of which focus on the American context
and are oriented toward the parents of autistic children. See, for instance, Simp-
son, de Boer-Ott, Griswold, Smith Myles, Byrd, Ganz, and Taspcott Cook, Autism
Spectrum Disorders. At the time of writing, a variety of therapeutic approaches
are employed in combination in the treatment of autism, including the Joint Atten-
tion, Symbolic Play, Engagement, and Regulation Model (JASPER), Applied Be-
havioral Analysis, Developmental, Individual-differences, and Relationship-based
Model (DIR), Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication
Handicapped Children (TEACCH), the Early Start Denver Model, and Occu-
palational Therapy Sensory Integration. Simpson, de Boer-Ott, Griswold, Smith
Myles, Byrd, Ganz, and Taspcott Cook discuss these therapies in conjunction with
psychopharmacological approaches.

37. Baggs, "Bunch of Stuff."
38. See Dolar, Voice and Nothing More, esp. chaps. 1 and 2.
39. See Dyson, "Genealogy of the Radio Voice," 168–72. Dyson situates the demateri-
alization of the voice within a broad cosmological shift that occurred in the period
500–300 BCE, where a worldview organized around flux and becoming (accom-
mmodating impermanent, corporeal, and unstable modes of knowledge, as seen
in the work of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus) was restructured by the
philosophies of being found in the works of later philosophers including Plato,
Aristotle, and René Descartes (in which stability, endurance, transcendence, and
permanence were favored as characteristics of true knowledge). The shift traced
by Dyson from cosmologies of aurality and instability to those of visibility and
stability demands to be read as the longer prehistory of the denigration of mi-
metic modes of knowledge discussed in chapter 4. I hope to further discuss the
rich connections between aurality and mimesis, which cannot be easily accommo-
dated within the scope of this chapter, in a separate work.

44. Dolar, Voice and Nothing More, 70; also see all of chap. 1 ("The Linguistics of the
Voice"). For Dolar, Lacan’s theory of the object provides the key to that intract-
able alterity of the voice (the voice of the other) that interrupts its function as an
"acoustic mirror" facilitating the illusion of self-presence. The obdurate objectivity
of the voice, he proposes, offers a positive counterweight, however elusive, to the
signifying operation that yields the subject as a purely negative entity. Neverthe-
less, relying solely on Lacan compromises our inquiry if we are to follow Bagge’s
indication that the autistic voice has a vexed and disidentificatory relationship
with language, since, according to Lacan, even this other scene is structured like
a language. For this reason, any equation of the autistic voice with the realm of uncon-
scious impulses would also be overly simplistic.

45. See Baggs, "Up in the Clouds."
46. Baggs et al., “What We Have to Tell You.”
47. Prince, "The Silence Between."
49. Mukhopadhyay, Beyond the Silence, 52.
50. See Savarese, "Cultural Commentary: Communicate with Me." Savarese is the
writer, co-producer, and protagonist of the television documentary Deej. The film,
directed by Robert Rooy, and co-produced by ITVS (Independent Television Ser-
vice), is in production as of November 2016.
51. Manning, Always More Than One, 152.
52. Manning, Always More Than One, 161.
and Dolar, Dominic Pettman has noted that Dolar is thoroughly unsympathetic
to Barthes’s anchoring of the grain of the voice in the organic, insisting that the
voice cannot be pinned to the singular uniqueness of bodies. Pettman argues that
Dolar’s insistence on the alien impersonality of the voice is equally unhelpful and
neglects to confront the enigmatic manner in which the voice is both singular and
54. See Grandin, Emergence, 25.
55. Frances Dyson has written at length on this topic in relation to the hegemonetic
voices encountered on mainstream radio programs. Dyson proposes that the apo-
theosis of inner speech is achieved in certain paradigmatic instances of the radio
voice, where the anechoic dead space of the radio invokes the anaerobic space
of the mind’s inner chamber. The disembodied, omniscient voice, especially that
of an older, white male, behaves as the perfect medium of language severed from
mainstream radio, unless they modulate their vocal in-
etions to accord with
56. See Ruoff, “Conventions of Sound in Documentary,” 122.
57. See Heath, translator’s note in Image, Music, Text, 10.
59. Adriana Cavarero expresses a similar sentiment when she describes the pleasures
of the voice as voice," or a horizon of experience that permits one to concentrate
on the vocal, liberated from the interpretive obligations of the phonemic, seman-
tic realm. See Cavarero, For More Than One Voice, 12. I do not discuss Cavarero’s
important book For More Than One Voice in this chapter not only because space
does not allow but mainly because her interpretation of this vocal horizon in
terms of individual human uniqueness runs counter to Bagge’s and Manning’s sug-
gestion that the human, understood as the ground of uniqueness, is a counterpro-
ductive framework through which to understand voice, which actually reveals
that the human is both “more and less than one,” as the title of Manning’s book suggests.

60. See Kozloff, Invisible Storytelllers, 6; see also 8–22. Sarah Kozloff provides historical and transmedial context for a variety of widely held prejudices against voice-over narration from the emergence of sound film onward. In addition to those I have mentioned, she addresses the literary and theatrical associations of the voice-over, concerns regarding narrative redundancy, and the subjective shadings of speech.

63. Nichols, Representing Reality, 21.
64. Nichols, Representing Reality, 116; and Nichols, Introduction to Documentary, 88.
67. Nichols, Introduction to Documentary, 72. When Nichols does focus on speech in its specificity, his analyses are limited to the rhetorical devices and evidentiary conventions through which speech endows its contents with the impression of truth (such as metaphor, metonymy, arrangement, refutation, delivery, style, and so on). In the brief paragraph or two where he turns to the nonlinguistic, fleshly dimensions of speech, such as gesture or affect, these too are turned into a mode of the articulate, as supports that reinforce the conviction of speech, rather than a portal onto a parallel, autistic spectrum of voicing that might operate at odds with a documentary’s voice (77–93). Although Nichols has written elsewhere about rhetoric and excess, he does not write about the grain of speech in these terms. See, for instance, the chapter “Sticking to Reality: Rhetoric and What Exceeds It,” in Representing Reality, 17–61.
70. Bruzzi, New Documentary, 3.
71. See, for instance, Renov, Subject of Documentary; Beattie, Documentary Display; and Small, Documentary.
72. Renov, Subject of Documentary, esp. 104–19; Rascaroli, “Essay Film”; Russell, “Autoethnography”; Lebow, First Person Jewish; and Lebow, introduction to Cinema of Me.
74. See Lebow, First Person Jewish, xii.
76. Silverman, Understanding Autism, 15.
78. Hacking, “Kinds of People.”
80. See Eyal, Hart, Onculer, Oren, and Rossi, Autism Matrix, esp. chaps. 1 and 4.

81. See Nadesan, Constructing Autism; Silverman, Understanding Autism; Eyal et al., Autism Matrix, esp. chap. 10; Murray, Autism, esp. chaps. 11 and 12; Fisher, “No Search, No Subject?”; Murray, “Hollywood”; Murray, Representing Autism; and Evans, “Making Up Disabled People.” Evans offers a persuasive reading of the structures of splitting and projection embedded in the “impairment” cipher of representing autism, which, she notes, derives from a Judeo-Christian cosmology in which biological wholeness is seen as divine.
83. McRuer, Crip Theory, 1.
84. McRuer, Crip Theory, 2.
85. McRuer, Crip Theory, 18.
86. See Murray, “Hollywood.”
87. McRuer, Crip Theory, 57.
90. Butler writes that “heterosexuality offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals heterosexuality itself not only as a compulsory law, but as an inevitable comedy.” Gender Trouble, 166; also see McRuer, Crip Theory, 9–10.
92. To quote the introduction to a recent issue of Disability Studies Quarterly entitled “Autism and the Concept of Neurodiversity,” in which Baggs is a contributor, his aim is to “remain attentive to a different sensibility — indeed a different way of being in, and perceiving, the world — while at the same time reminding us of the need to construct the category of the human in the most capacious manner possible.” Savarise and Savarise, “Superior Half of Speaking.” The authors also discuss the origins of and debates around neurodiversity at length.

Chapter 4: The Documentary Art of Surrender
1. See “Original Elephant Painting.”
2. One of the objections most frequently mentioned by skeptics is the idea that the mahout’s hand guides the elephant’s trunk, and that the author of these paintings is therefore the human and not the animal. Although I cannot address this more substantially here, the perception of manipulation of the animal by the mahout, and the possibilities of interspecies collaboration, are worth thinking through in relation to Lisa Cartwright’s discussion of the analogous perception of autistic children as being manipulated by their facilitators, and the skepticism regarding the interpersonal bond between the two as the basis of a legitimate, trustworthy mode of communication (also discussed in chapter 3). See Cartwright, Moral Spectatorship, 7–9, and chap. 3 (“A Child Is Being Beaten: Disorders of Authorship, Agency, and Affect in Facilitated Communication”).