VIDEO CONFESSIONS

Michael Renov

Every seditious of either sex shall after the attainment of years of discretion separately confess his sins with all fidelity to his priest at least once in the year. . . . Let the priest be discreet and cautious, and let him after the manner of skilled physicians pour wine and oil upon the wounds of the injured man, diligently inquiring the circumstances alike of the sinner and of the sin, by which he may judiciously understand what counsel he ought to give him, and what sort of remedy to apply, making use of various means for the healing of the sick man.

— CANON 21, Fourth Lateran Council of 1215

Confession increasingly takes the place of penance. This development can best be recognized by considering the fact that, in its early period, the Church ordered the sinner to make a public confession as an exercise of penance. Modern Protestantism actually puts coming to terms with one’s own conscience in the place of the external confession, thus unconsciously preparing for the future development that will go beyond confession and perhaps replace religion by other social institutions.

— THEODOR REIK, The Compulsion to Confess (1925)

Dear Lord, I’m sorry I fight with my mother, but my underwear is my own business and the business of my audience. It ain’t that yellow.

— GEORGE KUCHAR, Cult of the Cubicles (1987)
In an interview shortly after the publication of his groundbreaking first volume of _The History of Sexuality_, Michel Foucault suggested a trajectory of continuity that linked his latest work with such earlier projects as _Madness and Civilization_. In both cases, the problem was to find out how certain questions—of madness or sexuality—"could have been made to operate in terms of discourses of truth, that is to say, discourses having the status and function of true discourses."¹ For in his work on sexuality, Foucault had discovered "this formidable mechanism . . . the machinery of the confession," by which he meant "all those procedures by which the subject is incited to produce a discourse of truth about his sexuality which is capable of having effects on the subject himself."² Like autobiography, with which it can be aligned,³ confession was, for Foucault, a discourse "in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement," but unlike other autobiographical forms (for example, the diary, journal, or Montaignian essay), confession was, by definition, "a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile." And, finally, confession was a ritual "in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation."⁶

According to Foucault's formulation, psychoanalysis figured as simply the most recent and most scientifically explicit development of a confessional apparatus that could be traced back to Tertullian and to Augustine. For in all cases, confession was understood to be a restorative vehicle, of mind or spirit, yet one in which power was necessarily implicated. In the manner of the Augustinian model (Augustine's _Confessions_, a thirteen-volume work of the late fourth century, is universally cited as originary), confession could provide "a way to escape madness, to reveal secret, hidden places, and to face the world with a new and 'easeful' liberty."⁷ But, according to confessional logic, the cure could be bestowed only through the guarantee of God or psychoanalyst; confession required submission to authority, divine or secular. Significantly, in neither case was the confessor the bona fide recipient of the confessant's unburdening. The priest was only a go-between in the dialogue between God and supplicant, while the analyst was the site of a transference, the object of "certain intense feelings of affection which the patient has transferred on to the physician, not accounted for by the latter's behaviour nor by the relationship involved by the treatment."⁸ The implications of this dependency—confession as a play of authority, a regulation of desire—were the provocation for Foucault's critique of confessional "truth-telling."

A very great deal is at stake in this critique, far more than simply a revisionist view of religious ritual or psychoanalytic practice. As so many critics have noted, Western epistemology presumes a subject who must submit to the Truth, one
whose substance and identity are constructed in relation to an authoritative Other (the truth as divine, God as the “transcendental signified,” the final guarantor of meaning). One could then say that the Western subject finds his sweetest repose in confessional discourse. Moreover, it was not just the individual-as-subject who had been conditioned by confession, as sacrament or compulsion; social effects followed. In The History of Sexuality, Foucault traced the influence of the confessional mode at the level of the organization of social life in the West:

We have... become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell... Western man has become a confessing animal.

Risking a fall into absolutism, such a notion of confession is nonetheless compelling for the way in which it organizes an extraordinarily dense discursive domain [theological, juridical, psychoanalytic] articulated around the confessional act into an epistemological praxis, thoroughly imbued with relations of power.

THE THERAPY OF SELF-EXAMINATION

But few commentators, Foucault chief among them, construct confession solely in terms of submission to an authorizing and exteriorized source of power; confession has customarily been assigned a complex therapeutic value. Peter Brown, author of the definitive English-language biography of Augustine, judged the Augustinian model of confession to be a precursor for the modern obsession for self-scrutiny: “It is this therapy of self-examination which has, perhaps, brought Augustine closest to some of the best traditions of our own age. Like a planet in opposition, he has come as near to us, in Book Ten of the Confessions, as the vast gulf that separates a modern man from the culture and religion of the Later Empire can allow.”

In the mid-1920s, psychoanalyst Theodor Reik pronounced Augustine “one of the greatest psychologists of Christianity.” For Reik, confession was a fundamental trope of psychic life, one response to repression: “The general urge of unconscious material to express itself sometimes assumes the character of a tendency to confess.” Functioning at the join of public and private domains, confession as public discourse (confessional literature or performative display) can be understood either as a kind of self-interrogation that produces spiritual reconciliation while implicitly challenging others to ethical action [a theological reading] or as an acting out of repressed material that, when subjected to analysis, can facilitate the transfer of unconscious psychic material to the preconscious [a psychoanalytic reading]—therapeutic ends, both of them. And,
of course, therapy has emerged as one of the growth industries of our age. Given an understanding of the multiform historical role confession has played in the development of Western thought, how can we now begin to talk about the transformations of confessional culture in the late twentieth century? And what place should we give to video in this account? Foucault's theorization remains pertinent.

Despite the historical sweep of Foucault's formulations, which take as their point of departure the advent of the "age of repression" in the seventeenth century, The History of Sexuality draws our attention to the dynamic and protean character of confessional utterance, particularly in this century. Far from censoring speech, repression has produced "a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse,"16 which, as Reik notes in the opening epigraph, can find expression outside religion or the therapist's couch. Many commentators have remarked upon the decline of confession in its most parochial or doctrinal sense: William James, writing at the turn of the century, refers to "the complete decay of the practice of confession in Anglo-Saxon communities";17 Norberto Valentini and Clara di Meglio, citing a dramatic statistical decline in the level and frequency of confessional participation in the Italian Church in the 1970s, deem confession to be "in crisis."18

And yet, in the 1990s, confessional discourse proliferates. In what follows I will look beyond both church and couch to the aesthetic or cultural domain and indeed to a very particular corner of that domain—toward independently produced, low-end video, which I shall position against capital-intensive, industrially organized, mass market cultural commodities, on film or tape. In doing so, I take as my focus selected work by independent videomakers working consciously (sometimes parodically) within the context of confessional and therapeutic discourses. What I will say about video confessions is not, therefore, ontologically grounded. I don't wish to make claims for something like a confessional potentiality intrinsic to the electronic medium; what I say will be limited and contingent. And yet I shall argue for a uniquely charged linkage between "video" and "confession" in the current cultural environment for reasons that I shall return to later in the chapter.

Regarding the aesthetic domain, it should be said that there are substantial grounds for a turn of the confessional impulse toward specifically artistic ends (never, of course, to the exclusion of coexistent theological, psychoanalytic, or criminological contexts). At least since the Greeks, art has been judged capable of yielding "cathartic" effects for artist and audience alike through the public disclosure of concealed impulses and secret wishes, secondarily revised. Indeed, a large number of books have been written on the topic of confessional literature (among the chief objects of inquiry, Augustine, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Rousseau, De Quincey, Dostoyevsky). But in the latter half of the twentieth century, the vehicles of cultural hegemony have been transformed dramatically, along the lines of what Raymond Williams has identified as a kind of ongoing but interstitial struggle of dominant, emergent, and residual cultural forces.19 For while it can be said that there has been an explosion of confessional and therapeutic discourses within the public sphere of American culture, that efflorescence
has been less “literary” than popular cultural—in the form of tabloid journalism, talk radio, and commercial television.

Mimi White’s insightful book on American television’s place within this emerging landscape of public confession, Tele-Advising: Therapeutic Discourse in American Television, examines a range of TV formats (daytime soaps, religious broadcasting, game shows, prime time series, advice shows, shop-at-home television), all of which decisively if unpredictably generate narrative and narrational positions for their audience.²⁰ White ingeniously shows how television programs not only borrow from the world of psychological theory and clinical practice, but also “construct new therapeutic relations.”²¹ Following closely on Foucault’s premise that the production of confessional knowledge is equally an exercise of power and regulation, Tele-Advising nonetheless points to the multiplicity of subject effects created by these TV therapies, outlining as well the possibilities of resistant positions.

But I want to distinguish between White’s field of inquiry and my own, between the worlds of broadcast television and independent video, and thus to begin to account for the very different confessional manifestations produced in each domain. Throughout White’s discussion, it is clear that confession is not only narrativized but commodified. (One could say, as Nick Browne has argued, that the master narrative of television, in line with its “supertextual” function, is commodification.)²² Given the profit orientation of broadcast television, all confessional transactions—from Dr. Ruth to The Love Connection—are also commercial ones. If successful, the show’s presentation of embarrassing disclosures of newlywed couples entices a generous share of the viewing audience and thus higher advertising rates from sponsors. The lifeblood of such commercial ventures must be mass appeal, a requirement to which confession responds if we may judge by the number and variation of talk therapy vehicles. These therapeutic discourses offer illustration of Reik’s characterization of confession as a kind of repetition compulsion²³ (“everyone confesses over and over again to everybody else” says White of TV talk formats),²⁴ only these secrets are made available to home audiences rather than to professional auditor-confessors. As participatory as televisuality therapy may appear to be (“telling one’s story on television is part of the process of recovery”),²⁵ there can never be a thoroughgoing disengagement from the consumer culture of which the confessional scene is a support. As we shall see, there is a rather different dynamic to be discerned in the realm of video confession.

CAMERA: INSTRUMENT OF CONFESSION

We have learned from Freud that verbal presentations are necessary to make consciousness possible. It is only the confession that enables us to recognize preconsciously what the repressed feelings and ideas once meant and what they still mean for us, thanks to the indestructibility and timelessness peculiar to the unconscious processes. By the confession we become acquainted

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with ourselves. It offers the best possibility for self-understanding and self-acceptance. – THEODOR REIK, *The Compulsion to Confess* (205)

Yes, the camera deforms, but not from the moment that it becomes an accomplice. At that point it has the possibility of doing something I couldn’t do if the camera wasn’t there: it becomes a kind of psychoanalytic stimulant which lets people do things they wouldn’t otherwise do. – JEAN ROUCH

*Chronique d’un été* (1961), Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s monumental experiment in direct cinema, can also be seen as a milestone in the development of “camera confessions” in the documentary mode, an embryonic instance of what I have elsewhere called “techno-analysis.” There are two key confessional scenes enacted in the film: Marilou’s face-to-face encounters with Morin, in which corruscating self-inquisition brings her to the edge of emotional collapse, and Holocaust survivor Marceline’s soliloquy of wrenching wartime memory delivered to a Nagra she carries in her handbag as she strolls through Les Halles. During *Chronique’s* famous penultimate sequence, these are two of the most criticized moments of the film, as the subjects themselves argue over the sincerity of the personal testimony and the film’s overall merits. The filmmakers, although far from sanguine about the prospects of success for their experiment, are convinced that they are onto something. In Rouch’s words:

Very quickly I discovered the camera was something else; it was not a brake but let’s say, to use an automobile term, an accelerator. You push these people to confess themselves and it seemed to us without any limit. Some of the public who saw the film [*Chronique*] said the film was a film of exhibitionists. I don’t think so. It’s not exactly exhibitionism: it’s a very strange kind of confession in front of the camera, where the camera is, let’s say, a mirror, and also a window open to the outside.

The camera is for Rouch a kind of two-way glass that retains a double function: it is a window that delivers the profilmic to an absent gaze and, at the same moment, a reflective surface that reintroduces us to ourselves. Rouch’s insight brilliantly anticipates what the video apparatus (with the playback monitor mounted alongside the camera) realizes.

As founding a moment as Rouch’s experiments may be in the history of filmic confession, a crucial break occurs when the camera as confessional instrument is taken up by the confessant herself. In this configuration, the camera becomes the “camera-stylo” first described by Alexandre Astruc, a moving-image equivalent to the pen, which has so assiduously transcribed two millennia of confessional discourses. There are indeed exemplary instances in which filmmakers have committed to film the ebb and flow of conscience and moral evaluation: Jonas Mekas, for one, whose ongoing project, the “Diaries, Notes, and Sketches,” reinscribes and puts to the test the artist’s life since his emigration to the United States in 1949. In a film such as *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1975), Mekas lays his narration, steeped in the memory of the people and places we are shown,
THE ELECTRONIC CONFESSIONAL

Over fourteen years of existence, the mass-marketed video apparels has succeeded

The electronic confessionals

...
other preservational formats, such as the wedding video, in that they are autobiographical and counterindustrial.34

It is necessary to resolve the precise object of the present inquiry with even a finer grain. There have, for example, been some important confessional works in video made outside the autobiographical ambit, such as Maxie Cohen's *Intimate Interviews: Sex in Less than Two Minutes* (1984) and *Anger* (1986). In these pieces, Cohen expertly (and from off-camera) elicits the disclosure of intense emotion from a series of interview subjects. In *Anger*, for example, a man calling himself "Master James," a black hood masking his features, confesses to the pleasures he experiences through the whipping of compliant females; he traces his sexual preference to a mother who, although they shared a single room, punished him as a boy for looking at her unclothed body. Another man admits on-camera to four murders. While he displays no remorse for the crimes, only one of which he claims to have committed in anger, he does evidence an ironic self-knowledge. He describes the irreparable atrophy of his liver tissue caused by years of alcoholism and notes that Eastern medicine aligns that organ with one emotion—anger. In each of *Anger*'s seven sequences, people (as individuals, couples, or gangs) speak about an emotion that is very near the surface, anger is the lever whose expression frees discourse from repression. The confessing subjects have been raped, slashed with knives, betrayed, abused, and abandoned and have responded with tears, embitterment, or violence. The unresolved emotion they have lived with has in some cases driven them to unspeakable acts, which they nonetheless offer freely to the camera with only the occasional encouragement from Cohen offscreen. Clearly, as Rick predicted, confession has taken the place of penance. The subjects seek not forgiveness but expressive release in the form of dialogues—between imaged subject and a present but unimaged interlocutor—from which only monologues survive. I am suggesting that first-person video confessions, addressed to an absent confessor-Other, mediated through an ever-present apparatus, constitute a discursive formation significantly different from the truncated dialogue, one that offers particular insight into the specificities and potentialities of the medium itself.35

First-person video confessions satisfy Foucault’s formulation of confession as “a discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement,” with the “speaking subject” understood as necessarily and simultaneously the “enunciating subject.” (Here, enunciation entails the repertoire of tasks required to conceive, shoot, and edit a confessional tape.) The subjects of Cohen’s works are thus “speaking” but not “enunciating” subjects. Indeed, it might be argued that *Anger*'s subjects, like those of other documentaries of the interactive mode in which the interview format prevails,36 are more spoken than speaking. The distinction is pertinent to my earlier claim that confessional discourse is particularly well suited to the solipsistic potentiality of video.

With regard to the therapeutic value of diaristic video confessions, I do not wish to suggest that these practices provide actual substitutes for professional therapies. For its part, traditional psychoanalytic theory is fairly categorical with regard to
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the distinction between analysis and catharsis or "acting-out," which Reik, for one, never accepts as a therapeutic end in itself:

Acting-out, if elevated to be the dominating element of psychoanalysis, ruptures the frame of the treatment and transforms the provisional device of analytical experience into a final phase which is nowhere essentially different from the experiences "outside." That technique gives the suppressed impulses and wishes, as well as the need for punishment, full gratification, while we wish to avoid just that in psychoanalysis, which should, according to Freud, be accomplished in abstinence.

We said earlier that acting-out is not an emotional end in itself.... [T]he analyst reopens to him [the confessor] the way from acting-out to remembering which we expect. In this sense, acting-out, too, is an unconscious confession in the form of representation or display. Its interpretation is an essential part of analysis.37

Of course, the reference to "abstinence" in the above quotation is indicative of the distance that separates a monastic Freudianism from the free-for-all that is artistic expression. It is worth noting that autobiographical forms, particularly in the public realm in which film and video reception gets defined, are frequently labeled "self-indulgent." The asceticism that effectuates analysis (and the narrative economy of popular cinema is, in its own way, ascetic) is anathema to the self-immersion of first-person video confessions, which obsessively track personal truths. It could hardly be otherwise. According to the Freudian orthodoxy, then, "acting out" [first-person confession] demands its analytical Other [the analyst-confessor]. Could it be, however, that, in the stages of secondary revision we call editing, the videomaker-confessor has the potential, in working through the material, to produce, if only implicitly, something like an analysis, to move from acting out to remembering, from the unconscious to the preconscious or even to consciousness?

FIRST-PERSON VIDEO CONFESSIONS

A particularly telling instance of the transition from Rouch's incitational camera to first-person video confession occurs in Arthur Ginsberg's notorious documentary soap opera The Continuing Story of Carel and Ferd (1970-71), in which the San Francisco-based videographer set out to chronicle the vicissitudes of a former porn queen turned independent filmmaker and a one-eyed, bisexual junkie who choose to marry and live their lives before the camera in a Videofreex version of An American Family.38 When, months down the line, celebrity and the connubial luster begin to wane, Carel and Ferd wrest the camera from "Awful Arthur," the better to probe the depths of their unhappiness through a one-on-one confrontation. (It seems that the couple had been "seeing a shrink"—Ferd's description—in the period just previous.)
Toward the end of an hour-long précis of the Continuing Story produced by WNET’s Television Laboratory [1975], in which a reunited Carel and Ferd provide in-studio commentary for the edited compilation, the latter-day Carel describes this appropriation of the apparatus: “It was important for us to use the camera therapeutically. . . . So we took the cameras alone and used them.” “And Arthur had nothing to do with it” asks their on-camera interviewer. “He couldn’t use this stuff,” replies Carel, “It was too real.”

But the footage is used in the hour-long version [now distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix]. Ferd and Carel in turn focus in unflinching close-up on the fine gestures and bodily details of the other [Carel’s fingers nervously flicking ashes from her cigarette, Ferd’s unsmiling lips as he smokes, eats, and talks]. The one interrogates the other, posing difficult questions from behind the lens, the camera straining to catch out truths betrayed or, better yet, to get under the skin. It is a kino-eye usage, an attempt to extend the perfectibility of the human eye to intrapsychic ends. While the ploy inevitably fails [at least their union—as well as the melodrama—dissolves], The Continuing Story of Carel and Ferd establishes the paradigm of interpersonal video therapy with an intensity appropriate to the genre.

In the twenty years since the completion of Carel and Ferd, there have been a great number of first-person video confessions produced by independent artists. And while I think it important to draw attention to the range and particularities of this work, I will only be able to discuss a few tapes in any detail. The criterion for selection is primarily a heuristic one [those pieces that most vividly illustrate a particular discursive strategy or conceptual affiliation]. Artists who have produced video confessions of the sort I have described include Ilene Segalove (The Mom Tapes, 1974–78; The Riot Tapes, 1983), Skip Sweeney (My Father Sold Studebakers, 1983), George Kuchar (the Weather Diary series, 1986– ); Cult of the Cubicles, 1987), Lynn Hershman (Confessions of a Chameleon, 1986; Binge, 1987), Vanalynne Green (Trick or Drink, 1984; A Spy in the House That Ruth Built, 1989), Sadie Benning [virtually all of her work to date, including If Every Girl Had a Diary, 1989; Me and Rubyfruit, 1989; Jollies, 1990; It Wasn’t Love, 1992], Susan Mogul (Everyday Echo Street: A Summer Diary, 1993), and Wendy Clarke (The Love Tapes project, 1978–94; the “One on One” series, 1990–91).

Right now I’m sitting here with no cameraman in the room. I’m totally alone. I would never, ever talk this way if somebody were here. It’s almost as if, if somebody were in the room, it would insure lying . . . just like eating alone. I think that we’ve become kind of a society of screens, of different layers that keep us from knowing the truth, as if the truth is almost unbearable and too much for us to deal with, just like our feelings. So we deal with things through replications, and through copies, through screens, through simulations, through facsmiles, and through fiction . . . and through faction.

— LYNN HERSHMAN, Binge
Lynn Hershman’s on-camera monologues in the various entries of her *Electronic Diary* (1985–89) tend toward the overtly confessional. Her pronouncements in *Binge*, as quoted above, certainly lay out some of the issues to be confronted in the analysis of first-person video confessions. It is a central premise of my argument that taped self-interrogation can achieve a depth and a nakedness of expression that is difficult to duplicate with a crew or even a camera operator present. At first glance, the physical isolation of the confes-sant appears to be at odds with the dynamic of religious and psychoanalytic confession, each of which requires a confessor. To return to Foucault’s characterization, “One does not confess without the presence [or virtual presence] of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile.”

This model would seem, however, to apply to work, like Maxie Cohen’s, that depends upon the artist’s solicitation and preselection, varying degrees of intimacy or distance toward the subjects during production, and the introduction of gestural or verbal cues to induce expansiveness, closure, and the like. But this method entails, precisely, “direction” of the more traditional sort; confession is coaxed and elicited rather than simply given the opportunity to issue forth as occurs in the first-person mode. In contrast, the work of the priest or analyst is typically undirected; it is the ear of the other as an organ of passive listening, mirroring rather than choosing, that facilitates confession. With the interactive or directed variant, confession is tendered (not always consciously) to the videomaker herself; confessional discourse of the diaristic sort addresses itself to an absent, imaginary other. Consider, for example, Cohen’s *Intimate Interviews: Sex in Less than Two Minutes*, in which four men and women speak directly to the camera about the personal idiosyncrasies of their sexual lives. It is a compressed, parodic play of souped-up self-disclosure, confession reduced to the very edge of legibili-ty [TV-fashion], much in contrast to the extended, purgative narration—glorying in every pause, every paraphrase—in which Hershman engages in *Binge*. The latter approach, through its willingness to give center stage to unexpurgated self-disclosure as the enunciative act, tells us more about the specific character and potentiality of video as a medium suited to confession. From this point of view, video can be seen as a format historically joined to the private and the domestic, a medium capable of supplying inexpensive, synch-sound images, a vehicle of autobiography in which the reflex gaze of the electronic eye can engender an extended, even obsessive, discourse of the self.

From a crudely developmental perspective, one could say that first-person video confession has simply built on an evolutionary dynamic in which the public confession initially ordained by medieval church doctrine gave way to a private, one-on-one ritual. Then, in the sixteenth century, Protestantism eliminated the externalization of confession as a face-to-face ritual of reconciliation, fostering a kind of spiritual enter-preneurship. Video preserves and deepens that dynamic of privatization and entrepreneur-ship. Now, with the help of their cameras, videomakers can exhum their deepest fears and indiscretions all on their own, and then put their neuroses on display. In a
sense, first-person video confession is uniquely suited to its moment. Born of late-stage capitalism, it endows therapeutic practice with exchange value.

There are other ways to understand the advantage of the first-person format. As Rouch demonstrated with Marceline’s soliloquy in *Chronique d’un été*, the presence of the camera or recorder is sufficient to spur self-revelation. In the case of video confessions, the virtual presence of a partner—the imagined other effectuated by the technology—turns out to be a more powerful facilitator of emotion than flesh-and-blood interlocutors. Camera operators, sound booms, cables, and clapper boards are hardly a boon to soul confession. Hershman’s statement, cited at the beginning of this section—the claim that she would “never, ever talk this way” if there were another person in the room—returns us to the heart of the matter.40

Given that Hershman’s telling describes the travails of an eating disorder in which she ravishes a host of “caloric strangers,” frequently in the privacy of her boudoir, we can assume that the artist knows something about the solitary character of compulsive behavior. But is the tape simply another repetition of binge behavior or does it enact a level of analysis sufficient to move it beyond the realm of catharsis or “acting out” against which Reik warns us? I would argue that the control Hershman exerts over the structure and design of her tape, signs of secondary revision, suggests that once-repressed unconscious material has been, at least temporarily, rendered conscious and malleable. There is also a way in which Hershman refuses to let herself off the hook in what she shows us of herself. She warns that we are a society that functions most comfortably by means of simulation rather than authentic action or emotion. As she intones her critique of the growing inauthenticity of everyday life (“so we deal with things through replications, and through copies”), her imaged self begins to reduplicate itself in an infinite regress of video boxes. Hershman’s self-indictment might also be seen as a further indication of the analytical insight foreign to brute cathartic displays. Her sense of the limits of her “cure”—her confession as itself a kind of artful, socially acceptable repetition of her condition—speaks to the internally contradictory character of confessional discourse, which contains the symptom within the cure.41

While there are many more video confessions deserving of discussion, I would like to turn to the work of Wendy Clarke, whose twin vocations—as performance artist-videomaker and as psychotherapist—make her the ideal subject for this inquiry. Specifically, I want to focus on two of her projects, each of which explores video’s confessional and therapeutic potentialities in new and surprising ways. The place to start is with Clarke’s “Love Tapes” project, which, since 1978, has afforded thousands of individuals a chance to voice deep emotion through a process of mediated self-interrogation. The minimalism of the concept is compelling: individuals of every age and background are given three minutes of tape time in which to speak about what love means to them. Clarke facilitates rather than directs the process; she supplies her subjects with the opportunity to make tapes and the requisite tools to accomplish the task. A small boothlike structure is erected, usually at a public site (for example, a mall, a bus station, or a prison), containing a chair, a video camera mounted for a frontal medium close-up,
levering point that explains the power of "The Love Tapes." It is the mana-word that spurs confession. The performance produced is undirected but not, I think, unprompted. I would argue that it is the video apparatus as "pure potentiality"—its capabilities for preservation, instantaneous replay, repeated consumption, mass duplication, and public broadcast (all of which have been realized by "The Love Tapes" project)—that effectuates response. Admittedly, the myriad soliloquys collected by Clarke are not so pointedly therapeutic as those contained in Chronique d’un été or Carel and Ferd. They may not, in fact, conform so closely to what Lacan has termed "full speech"—the talking cure that works through past trauma as an effect of language. The tapes do, however, tap remarkable, and unpredictable, affective wellsprings in troubled youths, guilt-stricken fathers, adoring dog-owners, those who have lost or never known love, others whose capacity for love has been revived. The monologues, which frequently pivot on the confessant’s (in)ability to experience physical or emotional intimacy, repeatedly speak the unspoken. Why, we might ask, do these individuals, many of whom claim to be incapable of expressing their innermost feelings to those closest to them, choose to eviscerate themselves so profoundly for the camera?

It is as if, in an age in which the information superhighway breeds a kind of "knowledge dependency" via antenna, cable, and optical fibers, "The Love Tapes" effect a temporary inversion of technopolarieties. Instead of spewing a one-way stream of words and images (which, at another level, only soften up the consumer for the kill), Clarke’s installed monitor shows the subject only herself as she (re)produces herself. The screen-mirror also becomes a blank surface upon which an active projection of the self rather than a strictly receptive introjection reigns triumphant. At last, in a reversal of broadcast fortunes close to Brecht’s dream, the television stops talking and just listens. Video becomes the eye that sees and the ear that listens, powerfully but without judgment or reprisal. As for the potential critique of the tapes—that they sim-
ply commodify emotion or gratify narcissism—the truth is that only a tiny fraction of these pieces have ever been publicly viewed, and fewer still have been broadcast. The charge of media celebrity is unconvincing for work whose cumulative impact begins to feel more and more species specific, less and less individuated.

I remain convinced that it is video-as-potentiality that fuels the emotional impact of the “The Love Tapes.” What makes the experience of the tapes so powerful for subjects and audiences alike can never be duplicated on the couch. Clark’s success taps into the staggeringly hegemonic media current and temporarily redirects the flow. The very force that, while informing and entertaining us, delivers us to the advertisers now becomes a vehicle for performing ourselves for ourselves. The professional analyst can elicit, mirror, and interpret the subject’s desire but lacks the leveraging capacity that the media apparatus inchoately mobilizes.

“ONE ON ONE”

The main object that I really want is to see how open I can get to be and I think this is a unique opportunity for myself because I don’t know you, you don’t know me. We don’t have to ever know each other besides these tapes.

KEN from Ken and Louise

It’s possible I could say things to you that I couldn’t say to anybody else. . . . Maybe, we’ll see.

LOUISE from Ken and Louise

I find that it’s that vulnerable place that I have to address. And you have let me touch yours in a short time. Sometimes people can be married even for years and years and never have allowed their partner to touch that place. And for that I’m very grateful. I’m very grateful. It was a type of a freedom because I knew I was like you. . . . When you said it, I felt what you were saying.

KEN from Ken and Louise

While “The Love Tapes” may be the most streamlined and populist of first-person video confessions, Wendy Clarke’s “One on One” series may be the most complex, bearing as it does the traces of confessional discourse’s triple legacy—the theological, psychoanalytic, and criminological. For four years, Clarke was an artist-in-residence at the California Institution for Men at Chino. During that time she led workshops in poetry writing, painting, photography, and videomaking. Late in 1990, Clarke proposed a new project to her video workshop: a series of video letters to be exchanged between the class members and people on the outside. Like “The Love Tapes,” these video letters would be intimate and self-regulated but, unlike them, would be addressed, directly and exclusively, to an individual who would respond in kind.45

Clarke’s concept included another key proviso: the relationship between
subjects was to remain a video exchange only. “I wanted them to have a very pure video experience,” Clarke has said. “And I felt that the relationships would be changed if they met in any other way outside of this video space.” To that end, Clarke functioned as a go-between, minimally facilitating the tapings (usually made in solitude, “Love Tapes” fashion), allowing participants to play back the entry and reshoot if they so chose, then shuttling the tapes to their proper recipients. And, indeed, the connections made between these individuals are remarkable, crossing as they do barriers of race, class, gender, age, and sexual orientation. Those incarcerated are mostly young men of color (black, brown, and red), while the “outsiders” are typically older, both black and white, and frequently female. (Members of the latter group were drawn either from the membership of a progressive church in Santa Monica or from a community of successful African American businesspeople in the Crenshaw district of Los Angeles.) Beyond this sketchy description, few generalizations can be made that apply equally to all fifteen of the tapes in the series except to note that the linkages among participants are in every instance effected entirely through a media apparatus. In this regard, the “One on One” series is a remarkable case study, one in which, in the words of one critic, “the camera, instead of blocking communication, seems to be a two-way umbilical cord that nourishes the candor of both parties.”

In an age in which face-to-face encounters have tended to be displaced by mediated ones (for example, American political campaigns) and in which that development is inevitably figured as a loss, “One on One” demonstrates that the contrary can also be true. “I can express all of my emotions and everything to you,” says Raul, a twenty-three-year-old Latino, father of two, who struggles with alcoholism and is estranged from his wife. As the exchange progresses, Raul digs deeper: “To tell the truth, I’m happy without drinking, real happy without having the bottle and getting drunk, all of that. Because all of that time, I might have been with a smile but I was crying inside.” How is it that Raul is capable of revealing himself in this way to the video camera? Is the answer to be found in the particular wisdom of his interlocutor, Jeanene, a Caucasian woman in her late thirties who teaches high school in a Latino section of Los Angeles? Or can it be that the “One on One” concept engendered a therapeutic experience for its participants and that, in certain cases, we witness something akin to a positive transference, as described by Freud, in which the removal of repression is aided by the formation of an attachment to the analyst, an attachment properly belonging to earlier (often parental) relationships?

If the latter is so (transference mingling with incipient bonds of kinship or affection), the wonder of the “One on One” tapes is that the transference tends to be both mutual and reciprocal. In almost every instance, vulnerabilities are shared, positions of confessor and confessant exchanged. In fact, the psychodynamic is such that the openness of the one induces greater openness in the other in a kind of therapeutic spiral. In Ken and Louise, a black man—married, restrained but confident, a talented songwriter and vocalist—exchanges tapes with an upbeat but somewhat distant white woman of similar age and interests. He suggests that she is putting on an “air.” She replies that she is “afraid I’m going to say something wrong to you”; her distance is the result of an
excessive sensitivity to racial politics ingrained from childhood. (Her father, once a member of the Communist Party, had been jailed for his political affiliations in the early 1950s.) With each tape exchanged, the emotional intimacy gathers a greater force. Ken writes and sings a song to Louise about the colors not of the skin but of the heart. He is a startlingly gifted singer whose lyrics reveal a delicacy and depth of feeling. In reply, Louise shares with him a small stuffed animal, a monkey named Lucky, whom she cuddles and kisses, giggling with nervous excitement. “Every day I hug her and squeeze her and you’re just about the only person who knows about this.” His gift to her has inspired an even riskier display of her secret self. (“It’s possible I could say things to you that I couldn’t say to anybody else. . . . Maybe, we’ll see.”) And it is through the incitement of the video medium that so powerfully fuses distance and intimacy that this cathartic pas de deux is effected.

As the exchange progresses and Ken nears his date of release, many of the viewer’s expectations are overturned. Ken is increasingly buoyant of spirit, self-assured, offering more than receiving emotional support. Louise strips herself bare, revealing layer after layer of emotion testifying to the loneliness of her life, her inability to find a man to love. Her mood darkens. Given the audio/visibility of the process, we are able to judge these interior changes through outward signs—gesture, facial expression, posture, and choice of attire, as well as vocal tonalities. Our initial assumptions about these tapes are likely to include an implicit belief in the position of the “outsider” as the more powerful and empowering one (with the attention paid to the inmates restoring their damaged self-esteem). And while the assumption may hold initially and even throughout many of the fifteen “One on One” dialogues, it proves to be far from universal. By her fifth tape, Louise is slumped deep into her chair. Her unmade-up face a mask of despair, she announces that she is in a “state of grief.” In Ken’s reply, he assures her that her “dark, over-clouded look upon things” will pass. He speaks of wanting to reach out to her “in a real way,” adding “I don’t necessarily mean the man-lady type of thing.”

Both Ken and Louise struggle to define the growing connection between them. There is the flicker of sexual attraction, particularly in Louise’s flirtatious beginnings. That edge never entirely disappears, evidenced by Louise’s embarrassment well into the tape when she realizes that she has casually addressed Ken as “hon.” And, indeed, what names do we have for such a hybridized relationship—intimate yet remote, equal parts human and electronic? The distance is the result of the bar to bodily contact, nearness the result of an intensity of discourse, a
zeroing in on the other’s affective domain. After Louise shares her Lucky with Ken, he shows her the guitar that he has played in previous tapes. He has christened it “Louise” in her honor, adding: “It’s like a lady—curves and stuff like that. It happens to be brown, but that’s no reflection on you.” Exchanged confidences are gifts bestowed, producing and eliciting confession. As per the psychoanalytic literature, unconscious material is transferred into verbal presentations and perceptions, repressed material is unleashed, preparing the way for “the possibility for a better kind of adjustment to reality.”

But there are more directly political considerations to be encountered alongside the therapeutic ones. In the context of Brecht’s critique of radio (see note 44), video exchanges such as those of the “One on One” series constitute a kind of resistance to the commercial broadcast model, which offers a “mere sharing out” of entertainment. Brecht imagined the potential of radio as “the finest possible communication apparatus in public life,” as “a vast network of pipes” if only it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him.” If it can be said of the series that transferential relations between insiders and outsiders are mutual and reciprocal, it can also be said that the clear-cut distinction between producer and consumer is obviated. While a claim of media empowerment can be made for other public art projects, such as “The Love Tapes,” in which thousands of individuals from all walks of life have made tapes by themselves about themselves, here the gains are even greater. Here, in a precise miming of the Brechtian prescription, “the listener speak[s] as well as hear[s],” indeed, speaks only after listening, perhaps speaks even while hearing. This delicacy of listening is in fact enhanced by the mediated circumstances; there are no auxiliary sources of information for these interlocutors. The subjects of the video letter exchanges learn to listen with a special intensity, frequently replaying the tape just received several times before beginning their own reply. Theirs is a very special kind of speech, one that teaches listening.

These exchanges are also profoundly communitarian in their power to overcome the isolation of those incarcerated. How rarely do contemporary media forms work to build bridges across human differences rather than simply make spectacles of those differences? In this instance, the bridges built transcend their apparent limits in demonstrable ways. People who have never and will never meet enter into relations in which trust grows incrementally, in which vulnerabilities are increasingly shared, in which emotions attached to long-buried experiences are allowed to surface. In Ricky and Cecilia, a young Latino man serving a sixteen-month jail sentence on drug charges develops a video relationship with Cecilia, a fifty-one-year-old white woman. In his very first tape, Rickey speaks about the mix of feelings he has for his younger brother who is also serving time. He is sorry to have failed as a role model, regretful that their relationship has soured. In her next tape, Cecilia replies in kind:

I was very close to my younger sister and we were very good friends when I was in my twenties and she was in her teens. Then she became mentally ill and later, when she was in her twenties—and it was related to the mental ill-

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ness—she died. I lost her completely except in my memories and feelings. So maybe you have a fear that you'll lose your brother. But maybe you won't, maybe there's still hope for you two and you'll be able to connect up when you're both out of prison.

The young man is clearly moved by this disclosure; he returns to the topic of his estranged brother several times more during the remainder of their exchanges. Cecilia has struck a nerve. In "One on One," relationships of trust are built upon a foundation of reciprocal confession, freely given and exchanged. Confidences, painful memories, the willingness to allow the other to touch one's own place of vulnerability and vice versa become the basis for a connection between people who will never meet except on videotape.

The "One on One" dialogues are remarkable from another perspective as well. For if, as I have claimed, the confessions exchanged are freely given, they can be contrasted to another kind of self-disclosure well known to the incarcerated subjects. Confession plays an important role in criminology and the practice of law, as evidenced in such prime-time cop shows as *NYPD Blue*. Detective John Kelly's most outstanding police skill is his ability to induce confessions through recourse to an emotional repertoire ranging from the quiescence of feigned sympathy to the near edge of violence. If Kelly can move from tough guy to father confessor so adroitly, it is because, in ushering the accused into those airless rooms, he shares with them a zone of liminality. In criminological terms, confession is a threshold moment, marking the possibility of the criminal's first step on his way back to society. "By confessing, he finds the first possibility of a return to the community after he had put himself, through his deed, outside its limits."50 In that liminal zone, no emotion, no promise, no sign of remorse remains unthinkable. Kelly's weekly performances are staged both for the perpetrators and for an audience of millions. But there is a particular legacy—visual representation as an apparatus of social control—that haunts this spectacle.

Photographically based representation has played a substantial historical role in the recent history of state power. As John Tagg writes in *The Burden of Representation*, photography began to function as a regulatory and disciplinary apparatus in the aftermath of the failed rebellions of the late 1840s, just at the moment of the consolidation of power of the modern state.51 Tagg traces a rendezvous between a "novel form of the state and a new and a developing technology of knowledge" in which photography could contribute to the control of a large and dangerously diversified workforce newly arrived to the urban centers.

Like the state, the camera is never neutral. The representations it produces are highly coded, and the power it wields is never its own. As a means of record, it arrives on the scene vested with a particular authority to arrest, picture and transform daily life, a power to see and record. . . . If, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the squalid slum displaces the country seat and the
"abnormal" physiognomies of patient and prisoner displace the pedigreed features of the aristocracy, then their presence in representation is no longer a mark of celebration but a burden of subjection. A vast and repetitive archive of images is accumulated in which the smallest deviations may be noted, classified and filed. The format varies hardly at all. There are bodies and spaces. The bodies—workers, vagrants, criminals, patients, the insane, the poor, the colonized races—are taken one by one: isolated in a shallow, contained space; turned full face and subjected to an unreturnable gaze; illuminated, focused, measured, numbered and named, forced to yield to the minutest scrutiny of gestures and features. Each device is the trace of a wordless power, replicated in countless images, whenever the photographer prepares an exposure, in police cell, prison, mission house, hospital, asylum, or school.52

Like the confession, the mug shot plays a recurrent role in NYPD Blue. Eyewitnesses whose testimony will be needed to convict are frequently given pages of images—head shots that have been illuminated, focused, measured, numbered, and named—from which they are asked to choose and thus provide the crucial i.d. In “One on One,” the incarcerated, while also “isolated in a shallow, contained space, turned full face,” are not subjected to an unreturnable gaze. These prisoners, after all, have already been “subjected” in countless ways: removed from social contact and from their families and given clothing, living space, and food meant to reinforce a regimen of mind-numbing uniformity. Indeed, the experience of incarceration is calculated to strip the inmate of all the trappings of individuation through which subjecthood is achieved. But, in seizing the opportunity to return the media gaze, to speak as well as listen, these men are endowed with a measure of subjectivity denied the most privileged TV viewer tuned to the broadcast signal.

The “One on One” project attests to a power latent in the video medium, a power that has seldom been explored. It is a power that is political, psychological, and spiritual: a power to facilitate the reversal of repression at the level of (confessional) speech and of experience and in so doing forge bonds that are wholly media specific. Contrary to expectation, these media-specific relationships appear to engender effects (the visible signs of bolstered spirits, as well as audible testimony) that are bidirectional, experienced by both video partners. It is my contention that this new kind of relationship is a fundamentally therapeutic one rooted in confession, freely and mutually exchanged. In “One on One,” the inmates’ confessions—the uncoerced expressions of unspoken pain or pleasure—elude authority rather than wholly submit to it, as Foucault would have it. These unsanctioned utterances serve no institutional master.53 While indeed judgment, consolation, even reconciliation may be sought from the interlocutor “outside,” the dynamic of dominance and submission is everywhere reversible. If the ear of the other indeed contributes to the (re)construction of the speaking self, it is only on condition that the positions of self and other, confessor and confessant, remain fluid and reciprocal.
CONCLUSION

As I stated near the beginning of this essay, I have little interest in the ontological purity of my claims for video confessions. I have, following Foucault, been interested in tracing a skeletal history of confession and of the forces of repression that have produced in the Western subject a “regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse.” I have claimed that a new and particular variant of ritualized self-examination has arisen over the past two decades in the form of the first-person video confession, with video understood as a format uniquely suited to that purpose owing to its potential for privatized production and consumption. While pointing to a considerable body of recent work made by video artists that I have characterized as confessional, I have given special attention to two projects undertaken by Wendy Clarke, “The Love Tapes” and “One on One.” In the tapes of these series, people of disparate background and life experience are given the opportunity to reveal hidden parts of themselves through direct address to a camera that they control. Video, as apparatus and potentiality, becomes in these works a facilitator to self-examination.

But this is confessional discourse produced neither for profit nor for temporary celebrity in the manner of commercial talk formats on radio or TV. Rather I have argued, most pointedly in reference to the “One on One” tapes, that video confessions produced and exchanged in nonhegemonic contexts can be powerful tools for self-understanding, as well as for two-way communication, for the forging of human bonds, and for emotional recovery. In contrast to the legacy of photographic representation as a regulatory and disciplinary apparatus, first-person video confessions of this sort afford a glimpse of a more utopian trajectory in which cultural production and consumption mingle and interact, and in which the media facilitate understanding across the gaps of human difference, rather than simply capitalize on those differences in a rush to spectacle.

NOTES

1 Cited in Jeremy Tambling, Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 37. Canon 21, “Omnis utrusque sexus,” mandated annual confession for the faithful, to be fulfilled before the Easter communion. The place of private confession within church doctrine was the subject of much debate and revision throughout the medieval period.

2 Theodor Reik, The Compulsion to Confess: On the Psychoanalytic Character of Crime and Punishment (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1945), 302. The book is composed of a series of lectures delivered at the Teaching Institute of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Association in 1924; its exhaustive treatment of the subject received the endorsement of Freud himself. (In a letter to Reik, Freud termed the treatise “thoughtful and extremely important.”) In Reik’s analysis of it, confession emerges as a functionally complex psychoanalytic term. The inclination to confess is “a modified urge for the expression of the drives” that “are felt or recognized as forbidden” (194–95). Confession produces a “partial gratification” of the repressed thought or act, a kind of emotional relief. While Reik posits a masochistic component to confession (a “need for punishment”), he claims for it another seemingly contradictory function, “the unconscious urge to achieve the loss of love” (208). Reik goes on to analyze the compulsion to confess in...
its several manifestations: in the fields of criminology and criminal law, religion, myth, art and language, child psychology, and pedagogy.


Jeremy Tambling makes the case for a distinction between autobiography, which he takes to be a "self-fashioning," and confession, which, of necessity, submits itself to the judgment of a higher authority. Despite these differences, however, "the intertwining of the two forms seems important, ultimately, rather than the possibility of attempting to see them as opposites" (Tambling, Confession, 9).


Sigmund Freud, "Transference," in A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 448. Freud notes that the transference can be either affectionate or hostile, can evince faith in the treatment or deep-seated resistance. This is because the analyst becomes an object invested with libido, a process that stands as an absolute requirement for successful treatment.

"Even we seekers after knowledge today, we godless anti-metaphysicians still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by a faith that is thousands of years old, that Christian faith which was also the faith of Plato, that God is the truth, that truth is divine. — But what if this should become more and more incredible, if nothing should prove to be divine any more unless it were error, blindness, the lie — if God himself should prove to be our most enduring lie?" (Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, trans. Walter Kaufman [New York: Vintage Books, 1974], 283). Lacanian subject construction positions the Other as the source of desire and of meaning. "What I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question. In order to be recognized by the other, I utter what was only in view of what will be. In order to find him, I call him by a name that he must assume or refuse in order to reply to me" (Jacques Lacan, Ecrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York: Norton, 1977], 86). In Lacanian terms, confessional discourse is always addressed to the Other; it is the desiring letter that always arrives at its destination.

Foucault, History of Sexuality, 59.

Any analysis that constructs the subject's dependency on an external, all-knowing source as separable from the therapeutic effects that accrue from confession clearly misrecognizes the functional dynamic of the confessional act. A sense of unburdening can only occur if one endows the auditor with the power to grant absolution.


Reik, Compulsion to Confess, 250. Philip Woolcott, writing in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, conurred with Reik's assessment: "Augustine was the greatest psychologist of his time and probably for many centuries to come" (cited in Bathory, Political Theory, 55).

Reik, Compulsion to Confess, 192.

Bathory claims that Augustine developed "a mode of instruction through public confession" (17). He examines Augustine's "therapeutic method," in particular his use of anxiety as a positive rather than negative force. "Anxiety was a necessary part of people's lives, and he offered them the means to face it. In the process, anxiety took on a creative potential in that it could—if properly perceived—challenge people and lead not to paralysis but to an active search for self-realization" (38).

Foucault, History of Sexuality, 34.


Ibid., 19.
“The actual commodity, then, is the ultimate referent of the television discourse” (Nick Browne, “The Political Economy of the Television (Super)Text,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 3 [Summer 1984]: 181).

“The compulsive factor eventually found its representation and objectification in the obligation to confess,” says Reik in *The Compulsion to Confess* (300). Mandatory monthly confession after the Council of Trent finds its therapeutic counterpart in the obligatory scheduling of analytic sessions.

*White, Tele-Advising*, 179. The confessional display can also become the basis for the viewer’s own repetition compulsion, as a number of television audience studies have shown.

Ibid., 182.


David E. James has written with great insight on the alternative cinemas that emerged in the United States during the 1960s in opposition to the hegemonic or industrial cinema. At issue is a notion of the “mode of cultural production” inspired by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno but considerably qualified by, among other factors, the many “renegade uses” at the point of consumption (David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989], 3–28).

Perhaps, rather than pointing to the limits of electronic “handcrafting,” it would be more accurate to suggest that the artisanal potential for video culture is simply unlike the cinema’s, which is organized around tactility (the “feel” of celluloid). The first and legendary video art events of the early 1960s, Nam June Paik’s and Wolf Vostell’s, were installations in which the televisual hardware was stripped of its technological value, then reworked “by hand” to suit the artist’s vision. Banks of TV sets became the plastic medium. Video art thus began as a kind of artisanal reflex to the very technology that rendered it possible.

Long after I had begun to research this essay, which I planned to call “The Electronic Confessional,” I chanced upon a book of the same name authored by a husband and wife team of writers specializing in sexology (Howard R. and Martha E. Lewis, *The Electronic Confessional: A Sex Book of the 80’s* [New York: Evans, 1986]). The Lewises had, it seems, developed a computer service called Human Sexuality (HSX for short), a “videotex” service offering “discussion, information and advice on a wide variety of issues related to sex.” The book offers an introduction to the system and its uses for the uninitiated while devoting itself primarily to the reproduction of a selection of HSX queries, entries, and exchanges. One example may serve to illustrate the tone of the book: a married man confesses to a predilection for masturbating while wearing diapers into which he has previously urinated. “My wife and I have ‘normal’ sex, but I need more sexual release than she does. So I turn to the diaper” (88). Through the services of HSX, the man is informed of a group called the Diaper Pail Fraternity out of Sausalito, California (with a membership of fifteen hundred), with whom he may presumably choose to find fellowship. The book certainly suggested whole new frontiers of confessional discourse for the 1990s. It also convinced me to find another title for this chapter.

“The emphasis here is on the replication of the historical real, the creation of a second-order reality cut to the measure of our desire—to cheat death, stop time, restore loss” (Michael Renov, “Toward a Poetics of Documentary,” in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov [New York: Routledge, 1993], 25).

Indeed the wedding video must delegate the first-person function to the roving or multiple eye of the professional. For a thorough treatment of this video phenomenon, see James Moran’s chapter 23 essay, in this book.
Of course, all confession is spoken in the "first person." The distinction I wish to make is between confession that is produced through the intervention of another party who controls enunciation and that discourse that is self-activated, subject only to one's own editorial agency.

The interactive mode is the useful term adopted by Bill Nichols to describe the third of four documentary modes of representation in his Representing Reality (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 32-75. In comparison with the expository mode, in which arguments are rhetorically developed, frequently via voice-over narration, or the observational mode, which opts for the noninterventionism of American direct cinema, films of the interactive type "stress images of testimony or verbal exchange and images of demonstration... Textual authority shifts toward the social actors recruited... The shift of emphasis [is] from an author-centered voice of authority to a witness-centered voice of testimony" (44, 48).

Reik, Compulsion to Confess, 210–11.

Over a period of many months in the early 1970s, Carel and Ferd remained a staple feature at the Video Free America exhibition site in the warehouse district of San Francisco. Local audiences were able to develop a long-term relationship with the unfolding melodrama in the manner of mainstream soaps.

Foucault, History of Sexuality, 61-62.

Hershman's statement is deliciously paradoxical, since she knows her discourse to be a public one, albeit an exquisitely private public discourse.

Here I refer to Reik's analysis of the confessional impulse in which he notes that confession "grants a partial gratification to the repressed wishes and impulses" while also fulfilling the need for punishment. "Actually, we often see symptoms disappear in analysis when needs of this kind, at odds with each other, have found a completely adequate expression in confession" (204).

Is it only coincidental that the edifice in which "Love Tapes" are made is architecturally congruent with the increasingly obsolescent church confessional? The design of each, suited to the containment of a single confessing body, nevertheless provides windowed access to another space that underwrites and authorizes it.

I borrow the notion of the mana-word from Roland Barthes: "In an author's lexicon, will there not always be a word-as-mana, a word whose ardent, complex, ineffable, and somehow sacred signification gives the illusion that by this word one might answer for everything? Such a word is neither eccentric nor central; it is motionless and carried, floating, never pigeonholed, always atopic (escaping any topic), at once remainder and supplement, a signer taking up the place of every signified." For Barthes, that word is body (Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard [New York: Hill and Wang, 1977], 129).

In "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication," written in 1932, Bertolt Brecht critiqued radio for the singularity of its purpose: as a profit-motivated vehicle for delivering entertainment rather than as a medium of two-way exchange. "But quite apart from the dubiousness of its functions, radio is one-sided when it should be two-. It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication... The slightest advance in this direction is bound to succeed far more spectacularly than any performance of a culinary kind. As for the technique that needs to be developed for all such operations, it must follow the prime objective of turning the audience not only into pupils but into teachers" (Bertolt Brecht, "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication," in Video Culture, ed. John Hanhardt [Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986], 53-54).

Questions of various sorts arise when the tapes of the "One on One" series are exhibited or broadcast. Is there a pact of sorts between the two interlocutors, which the introduction of an audience external to the exchange necessarily breaches? Only recently, three years after the project's completion, as the tapes have begun to be shown in classrooms, at public screenings, and soon on the Los Angeles PBS affiliate, KCET, has public exhibition become an issue. In my own experience of talking about this work and screening it in classes and public venues, I have found that audiences tend to be uneasy with their perceived positioning as voyeurs of exchanged confidences. The fact that the very concept of the "One on One" series was conceived in collaboration with the video workshop participants, all of whom signed releases authorizing future screenings of the work, seems not to dispel the uneasiness. This response is likely connected to a historical tendency in the West in which public forms of confession have been displaced by forms of self-disclosure that are private and protected (such as the "privileged communications" between
ourselves and our doctors, lawyers, and priests). The public display of exchanged confessions—when received as "real" rather than fictional and predicated on a one-to-one, reciprocal exchange—strikes some audiences as a violation of principle. It seems to me, however, that the project's fundamental value has always been as a kind of heuristic device, a model for interpersonal communication in a media age. From one point of view, the particulars of any confession are less meaningful than the potentiality of the project as a whole for the creation of human dialogue across a whole series of spatial and cultural disjunctures.

46 Wendy Clarke, cited in Howard Rosenberg, "'One on One' Is the Best TV Talk You Can't See," Los Angeles Times, 8 December 1993, F8.

47 Ibid.

48 Reik, Compulsion to Confess, 205.

49 Brecht, "Radio," 53.

50 Reik, Compulsion to Confess, 79.


52 Ibid., 63-64.

53 In fact, while the "One on One" tapes were made in conjunction with Clarke's video workshop at Chino and were thus institutionally "legitimate," prison officials had no idea about the particulars of the project. Proposals for future projects of this sort would, in Clarke's opinion, face little chance of acceptance. Personal communication with Wendy Clarke, 19 January 1994.