Visual Auto/biography, Hysteria, and the Pedagogical Performance of the “Real”

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Hysteria is a theater of femininity and revolt, a fantastic spectacle that delighted the onlookers at La Salpêtrière. What they saw were female bodies in crisis. What they refused to see were women bound by constraints wrapped in veils, carefully kept distant, pushed to the side of history and change, nullified, kept out of the way at the edge of the stage. My mom is not crazy, but like a puppet she too performed on the only stage possible. Better to be seen as an hysteric than not to be seen at all.

—Mindy Faber, *Delirium*

Did she [Mindy Faber] intentionally manipulate and mock her mother’s madness as the French doctor [Charcot] had done years before with the hysterics? Or rather did she choose this portrayal of her mother to indicate that not much has changed since that time period, and to implicate society in the role of gender and madness?

—Leslie, a student

Pedagogical work at the intersection of cultural studies and composition has emphasized a critique of institutions and urged students to become critical readers of popular culture, including visual texts (Berlin and Vivion; Bishop; Fitts and France; George and Trimbur; Maasik and Solomon). Yet little pedagogical work in composition—or in cultural studies, for that matter—has focused on the challenges of integrating feminist documentary films and visual auto/biographies in the English curriculum.1 Instead, it has focused in very compelling ways on popular media and film (Dunbar-Odom; Foreman and Shumway; hooks; George and Shoos; Giroux; Salmon; Schmertz and Trefzer). Scholars from a range of disciplines are just now becoming more attentive to the historical importance and theoretical complexity of visual auto/biography. For example, some scholars have illustrated how photographers and filmmak-

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ers break realist conventions in auto/biographical depictions by turning to postmodern performance and fiction techniques (Citron; Egan; Hesford, "Reading"; Hirsch; Trinh; Nichols; Smith; Waldman and Walker; Walker). Yet, as Ellen Bishop observes in her timely collection Cinema-(to)-graphy, little has been written about the interaction between the "rhetoricity of film and the categories of thought the students bring with them" (xii). In an academic climate increasingly dominated by an ethos of individualism, it seems more crucial than ever to engage our students in an analysis of how the production and reception of auto/biographical representations are mediated by cultural, ideological, and pedagogical frames of reference.

This essay takes up that challenge. It is based on my experience teaching Women and Literature, a lower division course for non-English majors at Indiana University. I organized the course into five thematic clusters: Violence Against Women and Women's Resistance; Maternity and the Politics of Reproduction; Gender Madness; Post-Memory: The Trauma of War Across Generations; and Performing Gender. As part of the unit on Gender Madness, we considered how historical and cultural contexts of production and reception shaped the figure of the madwoman in literary works such as Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Cynthia Ozick's "Rosa," and Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye. The curriculum also included a series of feminist films that rely on strategies of appropriation and parody to expose and critique the cultural construction and representation of the "madwoman" in popular, literary, and medical discourse. Of particular interest to me are the pedagogical sites of identification and resistance triggered by visual texts, and how students' expectations of documentary filmmaking and their presumptions about auto/biography and the "real" shape their transactions. More specifically, Delirium, Mindy Faber's auto/biographical video about her mother's long battle with mental illness, serves as an allegory of the contradictory interpretations of female hysteria as both a theater of femininity and feminist revolt. Furthermore, students' resistance to the film serves as a lesson in the ethical and pedagogical significance and risks of appropriation and parody as oppositional strategies (see Caughie 115).

After discussing what I will identify as the "unstable ironies" set in motion by Delirium and the pedagogical implications of those ironies, I will contemplate the affinity between medical pedagogy and techniques of documentation—specifically, photography—to elucidate how this correspondence has historically authenticated and captured the "reality" of hysteria. The first section of this article functions as a historical
backdrop for my analysis, offered in the second and third sections, of the resonance between student responses to *Delirium* and contemporary critiques of feminism construed as a generational plot of betrayal, where feminism (the mother) is portrayed as a traitor to women (the daughters). Despite the idealized familial narratives prompted by students' identification with the subject of the film (Faber's mother) and their antagonism toward the filmmaker, I argue that critical reflection on the identificatory lure of normative positions can foster a critique of how cultural narratives and classification systems shape interpretive processes and can provide a pedagogical occasion to engage larger questions about the ethics of representation and the performance of the "real"/reel.

**Pedagogical Spectacles/Unstable Ironies**

*Delirium* blurs the lines between madness and sanity and thus foregrounds the performance of the "real." In so doing, it puts in crisis—hystericizes—definitions and conventions of auto/biography and accompanying presumptions of authenticity and truth. Faber exposes the social construction of hysteria and the historical iconography of female hysteria through the creation of a collage of image-texts, which includes nineteenth-century medical photographs and engravings of female hysterics, clips from Hollywood films on women and madness from the 1940s, and video clips of a puppet who mimics gestures that historically have been associated with the hysteric. Faber appropriates archival images that read the surface of the female body for signs of pathology; she juxtaposes these images with idealized images of the white middle-class American family, captured in family snapshots, in order to reveal the constructed connections between pathology and performance and between domesticity and hysteria in medical and popular discourse. As in Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," in which the wallpaper becomes a metaphor for the layers of cultural scripts and norms that imprison the narrator, the photographs in *Delirium* function as a metaphor for the idealized familial scripts that burden both mother and daughter. Despite Faber's ironic portrayal, however, most students in my class seemed to feel that *Delirium* reproduced the cultural and pedagogical spectacle of madness and the pathology of voyeurism common in nineteenth-century representations.

Historically, female hysterics were positioned as *pedagogical spectacles* (object lessons) created by the male medical gaze. *Pedagogical spectacles* refers to cultural practices that make a spectacle of a material body or subject for the purposes of instruction, classification, exhibition, discipline, or punishment. With regard to the spectacle of madness, the
term points to the institutionalization of practices of scientific spectatorship, photographic surveillance, and optical scrutiny that serve as regulators of the social order. For example, in the 1840s, La Salpêtrière in Paris, which was originally a general hospital and a home for the elderly, was overwhelmed when eight hundred to fourteen hundred “madwomen” were committed (Ripa 9). By 1871, over nineteen thousand women in France were confined to asylums (1). This increase was not a response to a sudden rise in mental illness in the population; it was the result of the disciplinary power of the fears and fantasies of the ruling classes, who were anxious about women’s demands and the possibility of a rebellion by the working class, and who feared that the diseases of poverty (especially syphilis) and prostitution were taking over Paris (12-29).

In the nineteenth century, hysteria was viewed primarily as a neurological disease to which women were assumed to be more vulnerable (Kirby 122). The word hysteria comes from the Greek word for uterus, hystera. The uterus was considered the controlling organ of the female body, and abnormalities ranging from irritability to insanity were blamed on diseases of the reproductive organs. By the late nineteenth century, hysteria was no longer considered a nerve-related problem but rather was understood (via Freud) as a psychological symptom of, in Lynne Kirby’s words, the “repression of traumatic memories, specifically of a seduction scenario, and the consequent repudiation of sexuality, paradoxically considered to be a bulwark of bourgeois womanhood” (122). From a social perspective, hysteria was read as “an appropriate reaction against the oppressive roles women were expected to play as wives and mothers.” As feminist scholars are careful to point out, however, hysteria was not an effective means of protest (see Caminero-Santangelo; Ehrenreich and English; Herndl; Kahane; Showalter). The cultural spectacle and medical exhibition of female hysterics ascribed false agency to these women and dramatized an ideology of freedom and rebellion confined within the frameworks of medical imagining practices, neurology, gynecology, and clinical psychology.

It was precisely the antagonistic performance of hysteria and feminism that focused many of my students’ resistance to Delirium. In this film, Faber ironically appropriates dominant images of the “madwoman” in order to expose what Chris Weedon calls in another context the “hierarchy of values within the narrative” (102). Yet, despite Faber’s ironic portrayal, students struggled with Faber’s suggestion that her mother was not, in fact, mentally ill but was classified as such by traditional gender ideologies and a normalizing gaze that labels as “mad”
those who act outside of accepted norms. Faber presents viewers with an epistemological dilemma: how can madness be "real" if socially constructed? Faber blurs the boundaries between the staged performances of hysteria and the performativity of everyday life. At the beginning of the film, the camera follows the filmmaker's mother as she twirls and dances in a long black flowered housedress and sneakers in the middle of a street in a suburban housing development. Interrupting this performance, a snapshot of the filmmaker as a child with her parents and two siblings offers a comment on the domesticated and fixed image of an idealized American middle-class white family. In other words, the still photographs fix an idealized and normative familial gaze that presumably contrasts with the moving and yet no less staged performance of the "real" family.

We learn through Faber's voice-over commentary that she was two years old when her mother had a traumatic mental breakdown. Her mother describes it as a time when her mind froze and she was totally eclipsed by fear. Faber depicts her mother's mental illness as omnipresent: "Like wallpaper, it showed through layers of paint; it was a backdrop against which our family went about our daily lives." Her mother tells us that when she escaped from the hospital, after a year-long stay, she went to Sears to buy a gun to kill herself. But, as her mother says, "I didn't have the guts to shoot myself." The mother's disclosure—a confessional performance—unsettles the authority of the voice-over, suggesting that the cinematic gaze works in two directions. The mother looks and speaks back. Nevertheless, the mother appears to retain little responsibility for the overall presentation of her story. For example, Faber's mother describes her illness, bouts of anger and depression, thoughts of suicide, and violence as an anomaly, an aberration. But in Delirium Faber argues that her mother was "caught in the game called family":

I wanted mom to stop thinking about what is wrong with her and think about what is wrong with the world. After all, she wasn't the only woman struggling to survive in this role. It was there in her neighbors, in her friends; there in an entire genre of films in the 1940s about women and illness . . . I keep trying to have her read from a different script—to perform a different role.

Faber constructs a playful sequence entitled "The Life and Times of Mrs. Jones," in which her mother acts out various familial roles and gendered scripts. Each short scene—there are ten—is introduced with a headline: "Mrs. Jones Prepares for Her Day"; "Mrs. Jones Watches Her Garden Grow"; "Mrs. Jones Likes to Tinker"; "Mrs. Jones Did Some
Shopping”; “Mrs. Jones Likes to Sew”; “Mrs. Jones Enjoys Walking”; “Mrs. Jones Enjoys Collecting”; “Mrs. Jones Prepares for Supper”; “Mrs. Jones Waits for Her Husband to Come Home”; “Mrs. Jones Is Waiting.” The sequence opens with a macabre image of Faber’s mother surrounded by dozens of prescription bottles. The mother takes a pill and then says, “I am preparing for my day.” In the next few scenes, the tone shifts. For example, the headline “Mrs. Jones Prepares Supper” is accompanied by an image of the mother lying in bed surrounded by groceries, and “Mrs. Jones Did Some Shopping” is paired with an image of the mother standing in the kitchen with a brown paper bag over her head. The next scene “Mrs. Jones is Waiting For Her Husband” exposes the excruciating circumstances of the parody. Standing at the kitchen door with a knife in her hand, a knife arched as if to launch a crushing blow, her mother declares that she is “waiting for [her] husband to come home.” At the end of the film, a similar scene occurs. However, in this scene, Faber’s mother is not holding a knife as she awaits her husband’s return; instead, she thrusts a banana at his body. This revision might be read as a social commentary on the lack of female power over the patriarch or on the limitations of the plots that configure female agency as revenge.

The irony of “The Life and Times of Mrs. Jones” sequence lies in the disjunction between the verbal and visual representations. The visual functions as a “hysterical” elaboration of the verbal. The headlines presume a kind of domestic “normality.” However, when Faber’s mother speaks (and thereby assumes some level of agency), the presumed “normality” of traditional gender roles is exposed as a mad farce or at the very least as a construction. Faber uses techniques of irony and unexpected juxtaposition to expose the historically contradictory relationship between feminism and hysteria; she illustrates how women’s agency has been scripted in familial terms through the theater of domesticity and through hysterical plots. I use the term plot in the traditional sense to refer to “a series of events deliberately arranged so as to reveal their dramatic, thematic, and emotional significance” and to highlight how plots are entwined in cultural narratives and struggles for power—as in to plot against or to contrive toward an evil or unlawful end (Burroway 40). For example, the psychopathology of hysteria in the nineteenth century facilitated hysterical plots that constructed women—specifically, those of the privileged class—as irrational and inherently diseased. As Faber reasons, “My mom is not crazy, but like a puppet she too performed on the only stage possible. Better to be seen as an hysterical than not to be seen at all.”
But what precisely does Faber mean by the above assertion? Is she suggesting that a kind of contaminated agency is better than no agency at all? Or is she implying that agency is not pure and thus cannot exist outside of hegemonic frames and structures? In other words, how are we to understand the mother’s performance? Is the biographical subject cast as a puppet of the filmmaker’s agenda? Is Faber’s particular feminist critique of the theater of hysteria made at the subject’s (her mother’s) expense? If we read the mother’s performance ironically, as self-referential mimicry, we are led to assume that she does not accept her place within the hysterical plot. If we read the mother’s performance as unaware yet complicitous, we might believe that she has been exploited and manipulated by her daughter. One might argue that Delirium runs the risk of turning the biographical subject (the filmmaker’s mother) into a pedagogical spectacle—that is, she is exhibited as an object of curiosity or even contempt. It is precisely the ambiguity of the mother’s role in the film that some viewers find unsettling. Faber begins the film in an auto/biographical, documentary mode that prompts empathy toward the mother. The hand-held camera flutters as Faber frames a painfully long sequence that presents a closely cropped image of her mother’s face as she responds to her daughter’s questions. Even though the ironic role-playing scenes that follow cast a performative haze over the presumably authentic documentary scenes, there is nothing ironic about the mother’s constricted pupils and narcotic tongue tic. Indeed, many students expressed resentment at being made to laugh at someone with whom they were also made to empathize. Were these viewers traumatized by these contradictory sensations and thereby made hysterical spectators? Were they experiencing the pleasure of the parody as well as the trauma of its effects?

Paradoxically, Faber attempts to expose forms of social control and medical surveillance; yet, for many viewers, she fails to exercise ethical control over her own subject. Some students’ responses to Faber suggested that she exhibits the characteristics of the hysteric; her performative scripts were read as a display of excess, as an uncontainable—and therefore uncontrollable—feminist critique that goes beyond professional and ethical boundaries. For many viewers, the disjunction between what the film seeks to critique and what it enacts, and how the film undercuts itself, amounted to the reproduction of the nineteenth-century theater of hysteria. Faber’s critique of the family as an entrapping, oppressive institution may expose the social construction of female hysteria and the connections between domesticity and madness in medical and popular discourse. However, the film’s re-staging of female
hysteria as a theater of domestic revolt reifies the centrality of the familial in ways that may limit her critique. I too yearned for greater self-reflexivity on the part of the filmmaker, greater awareness of how she too was implicated in the pedagogical strategy of display and exhibitionism that she sought to discredit. The film’s re-naming of hysterical plots, however, does not escape implication. For example, the hysterical scripts staged in the “Life and Times of Mrs. Jones” sequence function pedagogically as an ironic acknowledgment of the film’s implication within the hysterical cycle of appropriation. It is precisely these contradictory impulses, uncomfortable implications, and jarring juxtapositions that make Delirium such a rich pedagogical site for the exploration of the production and reception of visual auto/biography. The film prompts viewers to suspend their desire for the unmediated “real” in order to explore the uncomfortable simultaneity of auto/biography and fiction, critique and exhibitionism, and appropriation and complicity, and the desire for closure and resolution that such tensions deny. Thus, Faber’s critique of hysteria succeeds, as Pamela Caughie suggests in a different context, as a pedagogical text “precisely where it is seen to fail, by not escaping criticism itself” (119).

Most students in a class of thirty—a class comprised of eighty percent white, middle-class, young women; one woman of color; and four white men—seemed to feel that the role-playing sequences exemplified the daughter’s manipulation of her mother’s story. Students seemed to yearn for an idealized family narrative—a resolution the film does not provide—and for the daughter’s non-ironic celebration of her mother. A few students claimed that Delirium reproduced the pageantry of hysteria and the theater of femininity associated with Jean-Martin Charcot’s medical demonstrations at La Salpêtrière (discussed in class prior to their viewing of the film). Students’ responses speak to the lingering antagonism between hysteria and feminism and dramatize the tensions posed by feminist acts of appropriation and parody. Indeed, I would argue that it is precisely the antagonistic performances of hysteria and feminism, domesticity and madness that captured and “fixed” (as in “made immobile”) some of my students’ resistance to the film. Were my students’ negative reactions primarily a response to the fractured familial narrative? Did they see Faber’s representation of her mother as a kind of betrayal of family secrets? Were they imposing the category of victim on the mother in a way that stripped her of agency? To what extent does the film mobilize a totalizing critique of the patriarchal family that establishes a prescriptive cause and effect relationship between domesticity and madness? Did
students’ identification with the mother preempt or enable a critical reading of the film and the problems of self-representation? Why were some students more willing than others to accept the hysterical excess depicted in Delirium as an oppositional use of parodic schema? Does the film presume a particular audience or a shared moral, aesthetic, or political sensibility?

One might speculate that students’ resistance to Delirium reflects a lack of awareness of feminist traditions of appropriating dominant discourses in order to reveal their ideological workings—in this case, the historical staging of the hysteric as a pedagogical object lesson. However, I would like to suggest a subtler reading of students’ resistance that makes visible not only how feminist strategies of appropriation can serve contrasting pedagogical goals, but also how transactions are mediated by pedagogical, social, and ideological conditions of viewing. Students turned Faber’s statement, quoted in the first epigraph, into a question: is it better to be seen as a hysteric than not to be seen at all? The shift to the interrogative prompts further reflexivity about the politics and pedagogy of feminist critiques of hysteria and the ethics of representing another person’s pain and suffering: Who is in control? Whose story is being told and by whom? Who speaks and who is heard? To what degree are viewers of Delirium implicated in the historical pageantry of hysteria? Does Faber strategically use the camera to extract sensations associated with voyeurism in order to provide commentary on the power of parody and appropriation to provoke disruptive performances? Finally, how can a feminist critique of dominant representations become part of an ethically and politically transformative project that works against the positioning of women as pedagogical spectacles?

These questions emerged for me while teaching the unit on Gender Madness in the Women and Literature course to which I referred earlier. One of my pedagogical goals in this unit was to help students understand how particular historical moments, different conventions of genre, and different audiences shape representations of women and madness. Gender Madness was the most challenging unit to teach, in part, because of the complex ways in which the trope of madness intersects with representations of sexual and racial violence, the historical trauma of slavery and genocide, motherhood and the politics of reproduction, and the classification of resistant individuals and groups as mad (for example, slaves who revolted, Jews, feminists). In an attempt to elucidate the intersecting themes in a way that did not position those labeled mad as Other but that enabled students to recognize how the figure of the “madwoman” has
been mediated by cultural frames of reference and visualizing technologies, I focused on the intertextuality of madness.

The concept of intertextuality provides a useful framework to further our understanding of unstable ironies—or the double-bind that irony creates—and to consider how the social organization of texts and the cultural, pedagogical, and rhetorical conditions of reading shape the process of interpretation. As Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott explain, intertextuality refers to "the social organisation of the relations between texts within [their] specific conditions of reading" (45). Their definition contrasts with the more common understanding of intertextuality as a "system of reference to other texts which can be discerned within the internal composition of a specific individual text" (44-45). In their analysis of the cultural practices of reading James Bond novels, Bennett and Woollacott argue that these novels are not independent of the "reading formations" in which they have been constituted as objects-to-be read" (64). In other words, Bennett and Woollacott look at the intertextual dynamics of reception and the rhetorical determinations that configure relations between texts and readers (263). This view of intertextuality has profound pedagogical implications; it offers us a way to work against the spectacle of another's pain and trauma (in this case, mental illness) and the curricular integration of visual autobiographies as if they were unproblematic, transparent representations of experience, or simply visual aids that divert us from the processes of interpretation and writing (Costanzo 79). Thus, I am not suggesting that teachers prioritize "experience" at the expense of social or literary analysis; indeed, the concept of intertextuality works against what Alan O'Shea calls "endless and regressive navel gazing" (525). Rather, like O'Shea, I advocate "reflexive review, so that our partiality, our system of inclusions and exclusions, is made as visible as possible, responded to and possibly modified as a result."

But what is at stake in making one's partiality visible? This practice does not amount simply to a call for auto/biographical disclosures or confessions but rather a pedagogical appeal for the articulation and analysis of the narratives, paradigms, and ideologies that inform, shape, and constitute transactions between texts and readers and between students and teachers. For example, some students' reluctance to engage the performative aspects of hysteria and feminism in Delirium seemed linked, at least partially, to their expectations about the "real" portrayed by auto/biography and documentary techniques. In other words, students' reliance on configurations of the "real" (or that which is deemed true,
objective, or authentic) may have limited their critical agency as viewers. Moreover, the historical correspondence between performativity and pathology, which Faber exploits in *Delirium*, challenges the real/unreal binary and highlights the social construction of madness through realist conventions. As the second epigraph to this article illustrates, questions of authenticity and intentionality surfaced in students’ written reactions to *Delirium*: “Did [Mindy Faber] intentionally manipulate and mock her mother’s madness as the French doctor [Charcot] had done years before with the hysterics? Did she choose this portrayal of her mother to indicate that not much has changed since that time period and to implicate society in the role of gender and madness?”

**Visualizing Hysteria: The Mad or Tame Pedagogical Image?**

In the nineteenth century, medical pedagogy and performance were deeply entwined with pathology (see Kapsalis). The theater of hysteria is most often associated with Charcot’s demonstrations at La Salpêtrière, one of the oldest asylums in Paris. In the late nineteenth century, Charcot, the neurologist (or, perhaps more appropriately, the master of ceremonies) hypnotized female hysterics and then unleashed them at medical demonstrations in the hospital’s semicircular amphitheater before audiences as large as five hundred. By the end of the nineteenth century, La Salpêtrière, a space that Charcot himself described as the “museum of living pathology,” was considered a three-star tourist attraction (qtd. in Gilman 194; Showalter 32). The pedagogical performances were reinforced by the presence of a series of images of hysterical patients hanging on the walls of the clinic. Charcot and his interns sketched and photographed hysterical patients during their attacks. These surrounding images presumably authenticated and contextualized the reality of hysteria.

Buttressed by nineteenth-century ideologies of the “real” and presumptions of scientific objectivity, photography promised, in Alan Sekula’s words, “an enhanced mastery of nature” (4). In particular, documentary photography was used as a treatment for the mentally ill and as a means of psychotherapy. Like many doctors of his time, Charcot believed that the photograph served as scientific evidence for the diagnosis of neurological and psychological disorders (Gilman 195). Photographs of “abnormal” states were considered therapeutic to the extent that they enabled patients to see the difference between normal and abnormal states and to realize that “madness” altered their perceptions of reality (Gilman et al. 355). Sequential chronophotographic techniques also were used to document the movements of the hysteric (see Figures 1 and 2). If, as Janice
Figure 1
A Mock Dance of the Hysteric

Note: Figures 1 and 2 are from Fulgence Raymond and Pierre Janet's *Névroses et Idées Fixes* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1898).
Figures 1 and 2 are reprinted courtesy of Oskar Diethelm Historical Library.
Haaken suggests, “Hysteria—associated with the body and ‘excessive’ emotional states—symbolized the gap between the known and the unknown, and the elusiveness of ‘man’s’ efforts to control nature, including human nature,” then photography became an ideological force in the documentation, surveillance, pedagogical containment, and control of hysteria (*Pillar* 66). For instance, through the use of photography, Charcot hoped to “dam and escape the hysteric’s ‘delirious’ verbal flow . . . [and thus the photograph would] save him from the hysteric’s ‘incessant babbling’” (Baer 48). The pedagogical theater of hysteria therefore refers to the material performance and the aesthetic and medical recording of that performance. As Sander Gilman and his coauthors observe, the patient “as the object of the medical gaze becomes part of the process of the creation of an ontological representation of the disease” (353). The staged photographs implicated Charcot in the pedagogical performance of the “real” and connect ironically to Faber’s constructions as the creator of *Delirium*.

Charcot’s series of medical photographs of female hysterics collected in three volumes of *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* made visible the connections among aesthetics, visual technology, medical pedagogy, and the interests of science (Baer 41-42). In the nineteenth century, the theater of femininity and photographic representations of hysteria served pedagogical functions. As Sarah Kember observes, both operated as “fetishistic means of social control. . . . Control was articulated and inscribed on the body by subjecting the isolated individual to minute and detailed forms of visual, textual and statistical surveillance and classification” (99). In part, Charcot’s notoriety was gained through his diagnosis of male trauma victims as hysterics; twenty-five percent of his patients were men. Photographs of these men were taken; however, none appear in his three-volume work (Baer 44). Although Charcot treated male hysterics, and published sixty-one case studies of male hysteria, women were ten times more likely to be diagnosed as hysterics and were treated differently than their male counterparts (see Showalter 33). For example, women hysterics were treated with rest cures whereas male hysterics were treated with adventure and travel. Charcot’s male hysterics were mostly men who were culturally marked as Other—working class men, Jews, Arabs, or men of the underworld (Showalter 72).¹⁴ Charcot also connected male hysteria, in Kirby’s words, to “vagabonds, tramps, society’s peripatetic disenfranchised,” those who “live in their own bodies and lives the metaphor of a characteristic trait of hysteria, mobility” (124). As Kirby observes, “If mobility of mind is one of the chief
characteristics of female hysteria (the rapid ease with which the hysterical passes from tears to laughter, for example), mobility of social place is the male hysterical equivalent” (124).

The pedagogical work of the camera as an apparatus of teaching, its relation to the historical iconography of madness, and the referential status conferred on the photographed female hysteric are particularly vivid in Charcot’s “flash” portraits, which wedded female pathology to technology. Charcot used the surprise and shock of the flash to fix an image of the female hysteric and to provoke and presumably capture symptoms. Yet there was nothing spontaneous about nineteenth-century photography. These shots were posed, the image dramatized, and the flash a constructed moment. (The term flash in this context refers to the process by which photographers lit magnesium powder to produce a bright flash, but this process also produced noise and smoke that often made subjects look dead, startled, guilty, or surprised. Thus, the state of technology determined the “look” of Charcot’s flash photographs. This technique contrasts with flash photography today, which refers to the ability to take photographs spontaneously in a variety of places.) As Baer suggests, “The shocked female body would remain cataleptic, completely unable to move but subject to the doctor’s gaze and hands. . . . The hysterical symptom of catalepsy captured in these photographs was understood by Charcot as the state ‘where the bodily members retain [conserve] the attitude that one has imposed on them’” (53).

The pedagogical interdependence of aesthetic and scientific representations of female hysteria are visually activated in Delirium through the inclusion of André Brouillet’s 1887 portrait Charcot at the Salpêtrière, one of the best known archival images in Faber’s film. Brouillet’s painted portrait depicts Charcot presenting his patient Blanche Wittman as an object lesson to members of the neurological service at his clinic (see Figure 3). Blanche Wittman, often referred to as the “Queen of Hysteries,” entered the hospital in 1877 at fifteen years of age and stayed her entire life. Apparently, she was a carpenter’s daughter whose symptoms began when the furrier to whom she was apprenticed tried to rape her (Showalter 34-35). Brouillet’s image is believed to display Blanche, draped over the arms of Charcot’s assistant, in the final stages of either a hysterical episode or a hypnotic trance (Gilman 213). Brouillet’s original portrait Charcot at the Salpêtrière also reproduces another classic image of female hysteria. In the upper left corner of the painting, we see hanging on the wall of the studio one of a series of Paul Richer’s etchings of the sub-classifications of the hysterical crisis, based on Charcot’s drawings
Figure 3
Brouillet's Portrait of Charcot

Note: A detail from André Brouillet's portrait of Jean-Martin Charcot at La Salpêtrière (1887), which presents the hysteric, Blanche Wittman, to members of his neurological service. The full image depicts Richer's portrait of the hysteric (Figure 4) hanging on the wall at the rear of the room. Reprinted courtesy of the National Library of Medicine.

from the teaching clinic. The etching depicts the hysteric in the second of three stages of the hysterical crisis, stages that are described as the epileptoid period, the clown period, and attitudes of the passions (see
Figure 4). The inclusion of Richer’s image of hysteria within Brouillet’s frame draws on the aesthetic gaze by revealing the cultural affinity, even mimicry, between physician and artist and between art and science, and how each authenticates the other through realist strategies. The etching mirrors the sketches that mirror the performance, which presumably mirror the psychological “real” choreographed by the physician.

In *Delirium*, Faber captures the authenticating circularity present in Brouillet’s portrait of Charcot through the juxtaposition of static nineteenth-century images of female hysterics with the performance of a female puppet hysteric that is controlled by a puppeteer behind the scenes. Charcot himself was suspected by medical rivals of coaxing women and of “puppeteering” fraudulent performances, these rivals claiming that not only did he coach his patients but that they acted like “marionettes, or like circus horses accustomed to repeat the same evolutions” (Dubois 16; see Showalter 37). The juxtaposition in *Delirium* of an image of a neurologist and his hysterical star patient with the contorted movements of a flesh-like puppet of a female hysteric exemplifies the regulation and control of the female body and the construction of the doctor as pedagogical authority and savior. In Brouillet’s image, Charcot is depicted as a “liberator of the insane” who releases women from the “chains of hysteria” (Gilman 213). Photographic technology thus captivated (and held captive) the hysteric’s agency. Essentially, this arrested image of female agency enabled the physician to construct himself as a savior. Furthermore, as Gilman suggests, the historical value of this painting, though minimal, is also pedagogical; it “lies in the documentation of the late nineteenth-century sense of the positive nature of treatment and the potential for [patients’] reentry into society” (213).

In “Photography and Hysteria: Toward a Poetics of the Flash,” Baer’s formulation of the relationship between nineteenth-century psychiatry and flash photography is useful for understanding the pedagogical spectacle of madness and the function of appropriation within hysterical plots. Baer suggests that the hysterical catalepsy captured by the flash and predicated on technological temporalities combines “the moment of a past, unassimilated event that is reproduced in a present state of dissociation” (62). This dissociation functions as a “simulacrum of memory, the haunting remainder of an unassimilated past event”—a “traumatic flashback” (62). The arrested images of the “flashed hysteric” serve, in Baer’s view, as an allegory for the technical effects and temporality of the photographic process and the affinity between photography and psychoanalysis (63). Baer invokes Roland Barthes’ notion of counter-memory to
Figure 4
The Second State of Hysterical Crisis

Note: Paul Richer’s drawing of the second state of the hysterical crisis (the clown period) from his *Études Clinques sur le Grande Hystérie ou Hystéro-épilepsie* (Paris: Delahaye and Lecrosnier, 1881). Reprinted courtesy of Oskar Diethelm Historical Library.
elucidate how, in Barthes' words, "the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (qtd. in Baer 63). These photographs present the belatedness of trauma; they create the "optical unconscious" (Walter Benjamin's phrase); or, as Baer puts it, they make visible "the symptom of flash-induced catalepsy" (63). The photographic process presumably functions like the traumatic paradox of Freudian theory, which is based on an understanding of trauma as an experience that repeats itself—an experience that Cathy Caruth locates in the "actions [and memories] of the survivor" (4).

The correspondence between trauma and photography lies in the seemingly oppositional yet magnetic force of the flash that captures trauma not yet known and projects it into the future. The materiality of the photograph, like the material body, presumably authenticates the unconscious. This formulation constructs an affinity between nineteenth-century psychiatry and photography that presumes a psychological and photographic "real" at the same time that it denies it. It is precisely this double movement toward and against the "real" that led Barthes to regard the photograph as a "temporal hallucination ... a mad image" (qtd. in Baer 65; emphasis added). In Camera Lucida, Barthes argues that photography can be either "mad or tame." He claims, "The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality" (119). Charcot's flash portraits sought to "tame" and normalize the excess of female madness, subjecting it to a civilized social and pedagogical code.16

In contrast, Delirium allows for "the wakening of intractable reality"; self-conscious acts of appropriation point to the "unreality or inadequacy of representation" (Brantlinger). The cinematic gaze constructed by nineteenth-century images of female hysteria has a defamiliarizing rather than a normalizing effect. Faber embeds the photographic gaze within the cinematic gaze and, in so doing, offers the viewer the prospect, as Kaja Silverman suggests, of "going 'elsewhere' and being 'other'" (102). Silverman explains that the camera "brings its referent before us," and thus the cinema reverses what Barthes calls the "having-been-there" formulation to "being there" (Silverman 101; Barthes, "Rhetoric" 44). The spectacle of Delirium in my literature class and the photographic spectacle of hysteria in Charcot's lecture hall are differentiated by institutional frames and pedagogies. Nevertheless, both sites can be read for the ways in which oppositional acts of appropriation become normalized.

Baer acknowledges how photography introduced new forms of
objectification and submitted the liability of the body marked as "other" to technological mediation (70). However, his lack of attention to the material violence toward women (mentioned only briefly in a footnote) glosses over the gendering and racialization of hysteria and its connection to the trauma of the "real" within nineteenth-century imaging practices and classic psychoanalytic theory. The "real" in classic psychoanalytic theory is figured as unrepresentable, as that which resists symbolization. According to Judith Butler, we can read Barthes' formulation of the "intractable reality" and the "real" of the photographic process as an analogy for psychoanalytic theories that symbolize the "real" as resistance (207). The figure of the hysteric can, in some sense, be seen as a metaphor for the trauma of representation within psychoanalytic theory itself. Teresa de Lauretis explains that "psychoanalysis assumes [sexual difference and subjectivity] as its primary focus . . . [but denies] women the status of subjects and producers of culture . . . Woman [is] at once the object and the foundation of representation, at once telos and origin of man's desire and of his drive to represent it, at once object and sign of (his) culture and creativity" (8). The contradiction to which de Lauretis refers is made readable in Charcot's flash portraits, which frame the female hysteric as both the object and sign of the male physician's culture and creativity. Baer does not consider how the "real" is gendered through the hysterical plots of classic psychoanalytic theory or how photography anticipated and reinforced the shift in Freud's theory of female hysteria from external causes (for example, child abuse) toward the fantasies of women based on unconscious Oedipal desires (see Showalter 40). This shift repositioned the analyst as a liberator of the hysteric's sexual secrets (Haaken, Pillar 66).

Faber critiques Freud's theory of hysteria and the positioning of women as pedagogical object lessons through the staging of a scene in which her mother, dressed in pseudo-academic garb, mimics the language of feminist critique. Faber's mother—sitting at a desk in a white tailored shirt, black tie, and large glasses—says, "Why is Dora's mother invisible in Freud's analysis? Once again the daughter speaks and the mother is silenced." Faber replies, "Freud never did understand the link between mothers and daughters . . . It is not biology . . . not nature. . . . It is a pattern of control, carefully manipulated by actors on a stage who keep women imprisoned on the edge in the enclave of the family." This exchange speaks to the patriarchal manipulation of the story of hysteria and how women (in this case, mother and daughter) are pitted against one another in a psychological narrative of betrayal. The implied critique of Freud
within this scene is compromised, however, when Faber equates her mother's need for and dependence on prescription drugs with her own use of feminist theory and then positions the physiological aspects of mental illness in opposition to feminist projects—clearly, a reductive formulation.

Despite the implicit reflexivity of such exchanges, equations such as these position viewers as if they were looking through the clinical gaze of the physician, who is traditionally gendered male, at the object of the gaze and the pathologized pedagogical spectacle: the filmmaker's mother. Students claimed that they felt as if they were voyeurs, peering in on the filmmaker's hysterical portrayal (and, for some, betrayal) of her mother's long battle with mental illness. To a certain degree, students felt that the filmmaker (as daughter) took pleasure in subjecting her subject to the controlling gaze of the camera. For example, students found particularly troubling a scene that occurs at the end of the film, in which Faber's mother takes the video camera from her daughter in an attempt to return the cinematic gaze. Faber asks her mother why she took her illness out on her. The mother responds, "I never took it out on you. I took it out on me." The mother demands, "Give me the camera. What do you think I took out on you?" The daughter replies, "You used to tear up my room. . . . I would come home from school and you would throw pots and pans at me." The mother says, "I don't remember that at all." Faber claims, as she grabs the camera, "You're denying it. I already have an ending, so I'm going to take the camera back." At this point, the narrative of childhood abuse and neglect becomes entwined with the "mad image." That Faber's mother denies remembering any such abuse led some students to assume that Faber has made a false accusation and this assumption reinforced a reading that dismissed the daughter's claims as hysterical (and pathological) elaborations.

The returned gaze in Delirium, one might argue, operates in exhibitionistic ways in that visual pleasure (scopophilia) comes from both the viewer's and the daughter's desire to look at the "mother" (the madwoman), as well as from the exposure of the mother's desire to look at the daughter and address the viewer. Indeed, the last sequence of the film, depicting the mother grabbing the camera, exposes the voyeuristic elements of the mother-daughter relationship and how the voyeuristic gaze seeks power over the biographical subject. In other words, here the mother is made responsible for both the daughter's and the viewer's anxiety, marking the mother as "the bearer of guilt" (see Mulvey 11). Thus, students' awareness of Faber's manipulation of her mother's story
called attention in important ways to the narrative gaps in representations of trauma and its belatedness, and raised questions about the ethics and responsibility of representing another person's pain and illness. This exchange between daughter and mother positions both as social actors on the stage of everyday life and thereby questions conventions of documentary auto/biography and realism as technologies of truth. The concluding sequence prompted a useful class discussion about how *Delirium*, and auto/biographical techniques more broadly, mediate the "real." As Weedon states the problem generally, "a range of technical devices" show us how the "real" is "a result of a range of conscious and unconscious choices about what is to be represented as normal or deviant" (102). In *Delirium*, the daughter and the mother yearn to control the familial narrative and its effects. Students' resistance to the film can function as a teaching opportunity—as a pedagogical flashpoint—to reflect further on how personal and social desires are shaped through engagements with representations and are delimited by certain presumptions and expectations of the "real"/reel (see Kelly 12).

**Pedagogical Flashpoints of Identification and Resistance**

... the performative may not always produce enlightened resistances: *the masquerade is only a crossroads from which transgression might occur.*

——Diane Brunner

In my class, I introduced Bill Nichols' categories of documentary representation (expository, observational, interactive, reflexive, and performative modes) in order to facilitate student recognition of the hierarchy of values at work within historical representations of women and madness and to prompt an analysis of how our responses are predicated, in part, on presumptions of the "real" and on auto/biographical conventions and expectations (*Representing* 32-75). *Delirium* employs some of the techniques of interactive documentary filmmaking—for example, the daughter asks her mother a number of questions to which her mother responds. The film quickly unsettles such conventions, however, through its auto/biographical performance of cultural scripts. In this sense, *Delirium* works against more traditional documentary techniques—such as expository and observational modes of representation—which are persuasive in orientation, emphasize objectivity, and wherein the commentator's argument dominates the text. Viewers of expository documentaries expect a logical cause/effect connection between events
and solutions to a problem (36-37). In contrast, observational modes of representation, characterized by indirect address, presume a detachment between filmmaker and the events. Speakers engage each other rather than the camera as if their speech is overheard. The stress is on a non-judgmental, participatory mode of observation; thus, such films often create the illusion of an unmediated access to historical reality (38-44). Similarly, interactive modes attempt to give voice to the subject and shift the emphasis from an author-centered voice of authority to a witness-centered voice of testimony (44). Reflexive films usually are more self-conscious about the structure and conventions of documentary filmmaking and about audience expectations (57). As Nichols writes, reflexive films question "the latent voyeurism in observational and interactive filmmaking, the power of the camera to extract confessional performances, and the indifference to personal . . . consequences that such filmmaking may encourage" (60). Likewise, performative modes of documentary filmmaking suspend realist representations and generate a tension between performance and documentation and thus often have a defamiliarizing effect in that they reorient the viewer's sense of the historical "real" through what Nichols calls "unexpected juxtapositions" (96-97; 60-61).

The role-playing sequences in Delirium prompt viewers to consider how much the filmmaker's mother can and does actually participate in the composition and to consider the performative and reflexive aspects of auto/biographical filmmaking. Given the mother's history of and treatment for mental illness, one has to wonder whether Faber's mother was fully able to comprehend the discourse in which she participated. Yet because Faber's mother performs the roles with such gusto and playfulness, some viewers may assume that she was, in part, an enthusiastic co-creator, and that both mother and daughter are invested in the strategic appropriation of hysterical plots and the ironic reproduction of the theater of femininity as a form of feminist revolt. This reading of the mother's complicity in the performance is reinforced by a sequence of roles that she presumably scripts for her daughter. The reversal of roles—the shift from filmmaker as controller and origin of her mother's narrative to the daughter as object of her mother's narrative—furthers the reflexive turn and prompts the viewer to become even more self-conscious about the performativity of auto/biographical filmmaking. At one point, Faber's mother says, "Now that Mindy is a mother, I think she should put herself in her own television sitcom: 'The Life and Times of Mrs. Jones Part II.'" Faber's mother begins, "Mrs. Jones Loves Her Baby." The headline is
accompanied by an image of a baby boy, with lipstick kisses all over his naked body, lying in a crib.

This sequence, like the first “Life and Times of Mrs. Jones” sequence described earlier, is composed of humorous and ironic scenes. For example, in one scene, Faber wears a mask while she holds her baby. Her mother explains, “To avoid the Oedipal complex, Mrs. Jones disguises herself while breast feeding.” In another scene, Faber is blindfolded and her mother explains, “To avoid penis envy, Mrs. Jones learned to change her baby without looking.” Like the earlier sequence in which Faber’s mother enacts various gender roles, this sequence is excruciating in that here the daughter (as well as the mother) can’t live up to the maternal ideal; she has to wear a mask. This sequence also refuses the pleasure of maternal intimacy at the same time that it characterizes the maternal ideal in humorous terms. Nevertheless, Faber’s display of the performativity of gender, domesticity, and motherhood suggests that parody can function as a form of critique and protest. Moreover, the unexpected humor in the film (one expects that a film about mental illness might be somber) makes realism and referentiality strange (Nichols, *Representing* 61). These sequences function reflexively; they “emphasize epistemological doubt” and foreground questions about who controls knowledge and the sites of representation; in so doing, they reorient the viewers’ relation to the social construction and visual representation of madness (61).

One could argue that students’ antagonism toward *Delirium* was a response to the film’s defamiliarizing effects. As social and historical subjects, we come to view visual texts, like *Delirium*, “with a range of competing and contradictory discourses, which confront and ‘negotiate’ with the discourses of the film” (Storuy 67). While for some students the defamiliarizing effects exposed the historical links between women and madness, for others they elicited the imposition of a familiar narrative, a kind of normalizing gesture or ideal. This interpretation was predicated, in part, on students’ identification with Faber’s mother, an identification that arguably the filmmaker encourages. The connection between students’ identification with Faber’s mother and resistance to the film became even more vivid when I reviewed students’ responses to my initial questions. Immediately after viewing the film, I passed out a series of questions for students to consider before launching into an open discussion: How would you describe your reaction to the film? What cultural knowledge or experiences do you bring to your understanding? What links does the film establish between depression and domesticity? What role does humor play in the film? Did this film help you to
understand the historical spectacle of hysteria? If so, in what ways?

Students expressed serious reservations about the daughter's use of humor. Indeed, most thought the humor in the film trivialized the mother's illness. One student, Patty, wrote, "I question the honesty and trust between the mother and daughter." Elizabeth reflected, "I think humor was the daughter's ploy to distance herself from her mother's illness." To a degree, students read the filmmaker's critique as an expression of her desire not to be like her mother. Thus, many students focused on the presumably "real" relationship between the mother and daughter—that is, the relationship beyond the film rather than the one constructed through the film. Or perhaps more to the point, students imposed on the film an idealized mother-daughter relationship. The need for a "real" relation between the filmmaker and her subject and the drive toward normalcy presumes that documentary filmmaking should play a restorative role. As I reviewed the class discussion and students' written responses, I noticed the extent to which their quest for the ideal mother-daughter relationship was informed by therapeutic culture, traditional notions of gender and the family, and an ethics of responsibility cast in familial terms. For instance, after a class discussion about strategies of appropriation and humor, students returned insistently to familial narratives that were inflected with pseudo-psychological language. Susan wrote, "I had difficulty involving myself in this film, as I really disagree with the negative idea of family. The filmmaker talked about the family as an entrapment for women, an unhealthy place for them. The film also treated typical domestic life with a fierce kind of sarcastic parody, which exaggerates the idea of domesticity as undesirable." Elizabeth said, "My first thoughts on the use of humor in the film were negative, because I thought that the characters were making light of a serious situation. Now, I understand why they used humor. I believe it was more therapeutic rather than just making light of a dark situation." Another student, Brian, wrote, "In a way, we become part of their world and we become their therapy. I think that humor caused them to overlook and deny painful events from the past." Aaron explains, "Humor undermines the negative effects Faber's mother's actions had on her and her childhood. There is much resentment from the daughter and using humor is a way for her to communicate with her mom without yelling or violence."

One of the few students who understood and identified with the daughter's use of humor and the appropriation of the historical discourse of hysteria wrote the following:
I think that coming from a dysfunctional family is an important factor in interpreting the film. Dysfunctional family humor is typically “not funny” to people who don’t have that experience. Sometimes I forget that some people get along with their parents and are even welcome to stay in their houses. The maker of the film might not have been sensitive to stuff like that. People with relatively well-adjusted childhoods expecting it to be lurid and gloomy like “Mommy Dearest.”

As this student suggests, some viewers wanted a narrative of normalcy that the film does not and refuses to provide. Indeed, the film confronts the desire for normalcy, especially in the role-playing vignettes. Yet, as I suggested earlier, the critique that Delirium offers remains lodged within a familial paradigm.

One could argue that students’ resistance functioned in the psychoanalytic sense as a denial or negation. Following Gregory Jay, Patricia Elliot argues that “what students resist knowing forms a structure or set of investments belonging to the ‘pedagogical unconscious’” (Elliot 144; see also Jay 789). In such cases, idealized fantasies are often imposed on the subject/text as a defense mechanism. Within this framework, students’ imposition of an idealized mother-daughter plot perhaps was predicated on an idealized fantasy about the “real” and what it can become. In other words, the desired resolution between the mother and daughter assumed that filmmaking—or, more broadly, the process of autobiographical representation—could accomplish such closure.

I became aware of the extent to which students’ resistance to Delirium may have been predicated on expectations of the “real” when I asked them to compare their reactions to another feminist film on women and madness, Dialogues With Madwomen, a 1993 documentary film by Allie Light. Students’ responses to Dialogues sharply contrasted with those they had to Delirium. Dialogues prompted a more empathic stance from most students, in part, I believe, because their expectations of documentary film and its portrayal of the “real” were fulfilled. Dialogues relies on traditional interactive documentary forms of expression. For instance, each subject tells her story with little apparent scripting or manipulation by the filmmaker. The film gives narrative coherence to each woman’s story. Moreover, the film draws connections between victimization and mental illness and thereby privileges a cause and effect narrative, which is perhaps a more accessible interpretation than a critique of the ideology of madness. There is little ambiguity in this film about who has been victimized and with whom the filmmaker wants us to empathize. Yet, like
Delirium, Dialogues is auto/biographical to the extent that the filmmaker is also a character in the text. At one point, Light tells her own story of madness; however, she mostly plays the role of filmmaker capturing the stories of other women. In contrast to Delirium, which includes reference to the daughter’s scripting of the mother’s narrative, Dialogues presumes that an unmediated story can be told. Nevertheless, Dialogues, like Delirium, has a defamiliarizing effect. The film counters hysterical plots that suggest that women are inherently mad or diseased with a plot about the material causes of mental illness, including institutional sexism and racism, domestic violence, and childhood sexual abuse. The film plays with the trope of “madwoman” by casting subjects as “sane” (read “real”) victims and by privileging their reality. As one student, Gina, put it, “The film caused me to question all the assumptions I have about mental illness. These women were obviously products of a sick society; they were not necessarily inherently sick themselves.” Other students felt that the connections between violence, sexual abuse, and mental illness were valid but too simplistic; thus, they understandably yearned for greater attention to current medical knowledge and the biochemical aspects of mental illness.

Students’ resistance to the strategies of appropriation, parody, and irony at work in Delirium may, in part, reflect their lack of experience as viewers of reflexive and performative documentaries and their desire for the “real” that is offered in expository or observational filmmaking. But their resistance also stems from medical knowledge about mental illness. One could also say that students’ responses are symptomatic of the ideological manipulation of mass culture that presumably would have us reproduce idealized familial narratives. For most students, Delirium did not promote irony toward the spectacle. Instead, the film’s strategies of appropriation, parody, and irony prompted students to produce idealized family plots. However, there were a number of students for whom identification with the pedagogical spectacle (that is, the filmmaker’s mother) urged them toward a more critical reading. Students who critiqued the film on the grounds that it reproduced Charcot’s theater of femininity exposed the potential risks and limits of appropriation and parody in a cultural climate wherein auto/biography—particularly autopathography, or auto/biographical narratives about illness—functions as an object of consumption (see also Ohmann). For example, one student, Erika, reflected, “I laughed throughout the film [Delirium], and then began to wonder if I should have been actually laughing.” Similarly, Jenny wrote, “I was laughing, and then a realization sort of washed over
me—like ‘this is real,’ and it was then very troubling.” That some students interrogated the performance of identification and resistance urged me to consider that identification and alienation (or resistance) need not function as antagonists. The fact that *Delirium* elicited student identification with the filmmaker’s mother may be its greatest pedagogical asset in that identification with the mother functioned as a vehicle for some students to question the ethics of representation and the effectiveness of appropriation and parody as oppositional strategies. Despite the conventional narratives that identification prompted (for example, idealized familial relations), these normative positions were not total or absolute. Identification need not function as a barrier to social critique or psychic or pedagogical change. In fact, reflection on the identificatory lure of normative positions can foster critical thinking. In other words, the tension that the film creates between critical detachment and irony toward the spectacle provides an opportunity to engage pedagogically with ethical, aesthetic, and political questions about the performance of the “real” in auto/biographical representations.

**The Spectacle of Feminism in the Academy**

In a cultural and academic climate of backlash, feminist acts of appropriation (particularly those that are auto/biographical in nature) can function like Charcot’s flash portraits in that teachers and students get “caught by the spectacle”—that is, they can be captivated in ways that immobilize social critique and the recognition of their own implication in hysterical plots (see Taylor ix). Indeed, some students’ resistance to *Delirium* may, in part, reflect their negotiation of the hysterical elaborations that characterize contemporary debates over feminism as it is practiced in the academy. For example, students may be picking up on the anti-feminist backlash that characterizes feminism as victimology. Many of my students seemed to expect and desire an empathic stance from the filmmaker (daughter) toward her subject (mother). Additionally, most students identified with the filmmaker’s mother. This orientation prioritized a mother-daughter plot of generational loyalty. Instead of seeing the multiple roles depicted in the film as a playful yet critical re-staging of hysterical plots and as a critical commentary on the spectator-spectacle relation, many students read them as further indication of the daughter’s (read: feminism’s) insensitive manipulation of her mother’s experience (read: the “real”). For example, Kelly’s identification with the mother led her to wonder whether “the daughter used her mother for her own artistic and political purposes.” Indeed, for some student viewers, feminism and
the "real" (that which is deemed true and objective) function as antagonists. Students' identification with the mother's "real" situation prompted resistance toward the daughter's feminist interpretation. Students' antagonism toward the daughter and identification with the mother might indicate their reading of the film as a generational plot of betrayal, wherein feminism (read: the hysterical daughter) is portrayed as having betrayed women (read: the mother). But, as I suggested earlier in my discussion of the film's unstable ironies, both of these interpretations can co-exist. One could recognize the film's implicit critique of hysterical plots and yet still claim that the critique is built on the exploitation of its main character—namely, Faber's mother.

The antagonism between feminism and the ideology of the traditional family is a contemporary incarnation of the nineteenth-century hysterical plot that situated feminism as an antagonist in an even larger betrayal narrative. For instance, in Telling the Truth Lynne Cheney blames feminism for the deconstruction of truth and the politicization of knowledge in the academy. She argues that pedagogical practices in women's studies classrooms—particularly those that focus on autobiography—foster therapeutic coercion. Cheney claims, "The encouragement—even the requirement—in feminist classrooms to confess personal views and traumas establishes an environment very much like the one that exists in victim recovery groups" (172). Plotting in this way, women's autobiographical representations are positioned as pathological spectacles, as deviant practices, as female excess. The skeleton story operative here is that feminism has betrayed women and de-idealized rational, objective truth. Autobiography is associated with all that is traditionally seen as feminine (for example, hysteria, the emotions, subjective experience, and so forth). Ironically, Cheney does not acknowledge her excessive reliance on autobiography (particularly the personal anecdote) in her argument. Cheney's conception of the pedagogical space of the feminist classroom is a pseudo-psychoanalytic space. The presumption is that the feminist teacher places herself in the position of the analyst, as someone who translates inchoate images and "hysterical" speech into "rational" discourse. Certainly, there are configurations of autobiography in feminist pedagogy that promote the spectacle of victimization and the theater of femininity. This is most clear in pedagogies that uncritically reproduce qualities traditionally associated with the feminine—for example, pedagogies in which the teacher is positioned exclusively as a nurturing mother—and those that focus primarily on psychological recovery and individual libidinal liberation. However, the presumed connection in
Cheney's argument among victim pathology, autobiography, and feminist pedagogy belies an awareness of contemporary feminist scholarship on autobiography and the subversive (parodic, satiric, and ironic) political and aesthetic performances of the autobiographical, of which *Delirium* is just one example.

In "Bad Girls and Sick Boys," Linda Kauffman focuses on the subversive spectacle of the autobiographical body created by feminist artists. She discusses "bad girls"—artists such as Kathy Acker, Rebecca Brown, and Susie Bright, and the performance artist Annie Sprinkle who performs an examination on her own cervix using a speculum and a flashlight and invites audiences to have a look. As Kauffman explains, "what many 'bad girls' are doing is making female desire, sexuality, and the body substantial—tangible, material, in-your-face—sometimes literally and sometimes with a vengeance. They stage their own bodies as sites of contestation through parody, defamiliarization, or incongruous juxtaposition" (34). Likewise, Faber forces us to confront the spectacle of femininity, hysteria, and female pleasure. She too is a "bad girl." That Faber stages her mother's body as a site of contestation, however, led many student viewers to the claim that she is a "bad daughter."

Faber's reclamation of a presumably lost feminist language of pleasure, parody, and critique functions in a manner that at first seems analogous to early French feminist projects that called for the revision of cultural narratives of victimization and the articulation of the lost language of the hysterical as a female signifying system. French feminist sites of resistance have been located, for the most part, at the level of style and language; as Teresa Ebert points out, French feminism seeks to "deconstruct and dehierarchize dominant discourses through textualizing strategies" (894). One might say that Faber's recreation functions like *écriture féminine*—that is, it is, as Lynn Worsham says of *écriture féminine*, "spectacular in its rhetoric . . . shocking and outrageous, alienating, and for others, exhilarating" (86). As Worsham explains, *écriture féminine*, as a practice of mimicry, is "a practice of self-exile" that "repeats and parodies phallocentric modes of argument to exaggerate their effects and expose their arbitrary privilege" (87). Yet, *Delirium* did little to subvert the dominant discourse on women and madness from many students' viewpoint, though it certainly unsettled expectations. For the most part, the film served as a catalyst for the re-articulation of dominant narratives and hysterical plots. Such patterns speak, I believe, to the pressing need for more work on how feminist texts play out pedagogically and the analysis of how presumably resistant realist representa-
tions get recuperated as hysterical plots.

Hysteria and feminism may appear antithetical; however, as Claire Kahane perceptively notes, they “intersected in their inverse relation to the speaking woman. Indeed, feminism in its commitment to giving women public voice . . . seemed the mirror image of hysteria, in which the body spoke what the voice could not” (280). The mirror image does not resolve the contradictions or historical asymmetry of hysteria and feminism as politically transformative discourses; however, the correspondence does anticipate recent formulations of feminist agency and performative pedagogy predicated on an understanding of the discursive nature of power and strategies of appropriation and parody. For example, de Lauretis asserts that “the only way to position oneself outside of [the dominant mode of enunciation and address] is to displace oneself within it—to refuse the question as formulated, or to answer deviously (though in its words), even to quote (but against the grain)” (7). Similarly, Butler conceptualizes “agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power” (15).

Likewise, the agency that Delirium affords the subject and viewer is predicated on practices of appropriation and reiteration. However, Delirium never answers a central question: is it better to be seen as a hysteric than not to be seen at all? The “real” is never offered up. There is no final interpretation. Irony does not resolve into normalcy. The film remains speculative, performative, and unstable in its ironies. Similarly, pedagogy is performative; as teachers we enact certain educational scripts and, in some cases, hysterical plots. Instead of typecasting students as passive vessels or overdetermined viewers, or positioning “difference” as a pedagogical spectacle and ourselves as liberators or saviors, as did Charcot in the lecture halls of La Salpêtrière, we must examine how our students negotiate a sense of critical agency among conflicting cultural discourses. If there is a lesson to be learned from students’ resistance to Delirium, it is what Derrida calls the “undecidable contamination” between intentional acts and citations (qtd. in Caughie 119). Because of the ways that “our practices may belie our intentions,” as Pamela Caughie suggests, she advocates, and I concur, a “performative pedagogy,” which is based on the belief that no practice can presume to guarantee certain results, for to make such a presumption would be a denial of the ethical relation—a denial of what Caughie terms the “dynamics of responsibility” (120, 119). The historical prominence of madness, foolery, and hysteria as tropes in literature, art, and film, and the public fascination, past and present, with the figure of the “madwoman” prompt teachers to
consider how the introduction of such works may reproduce or contest the spectacle of the Other. *Delirium* provides a rich opportunity for considering how “pedagogy might *exploit*, not *resolve*, the positive potentialities of its own unreliability,” and how auto/biographical representations are stylized and disciplined in the classroom (Caughie 120).21

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Notes

1. The term *auto/biography* signifies works that link experience and identity to an individual. The slash mark is meant to highlight how the self is storied and to recognize works that blur the line between the genres of autobiography and biography. Kelly also uses the slash mark in *auto/biography* to narrow the sense of the term to “any self-referential writing . . . that presents explicit and peculiar links of experience, identity, and consciousness in the name of a signed author” (141). In my use, *auto/biography* refers more broadly to spoken, visual, written, and performative acts of self-representation (see *Framing*).

2. Other possible texts to consider for a unit on women and madness include Helena María Viramonte’s “The Cariboo Cafe”; Hollywood films such as *The Snake Pit* and *The Three Faces of Eve*; and novels such as Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Janet Frame’s *An Autobiography*, Kate Millet’s *The Loony Bin Trip*, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

3. The term *appropriation* refers to disrupted processes by which the dominated “use the tools of the dominant discourse to resist political or cultural control,” the result of which is never a simple reproduction but which contains a certain menace or mockery (Ashcroft et al. 19). In this sense, appropriation resembles the concept of mimicry as it is used in postcolonial theory, which suggests that mimicry functions as a “blurred copy” that can be threatening. Thus, mimicry potentially functions as a form of mockery that can locate fissures and cracks in dominant discourses. I should point out, however, that the term *appropriation* (more so than *mimicry*) has been used to refer to the processes by which dominant classes appropriate the discourses and narratives of the dominated. In *A Theory of Parody*, Hutcheon offers insight into the complex meaning of parody. She argues that parody does not simply refer to ridiculing imitations, but that it is “one mode of coming to terms with the texts of that ‘rich and intimidating legacy of the past’” (4-5). Parody makes particular demands on viewers/readers, and, as I point out in my discussion of student responses to *Delirium*, it depends for its effect more on their knowledge than on their willingness to play. In other words, representations that rely on parody as
a form of social critique are, as Hutcheon suggests, "haunted by cultural memories whose tyrannical weight they must overthrow by their incorporation and inversion of them" (5). Following Bakhtin, Hutcheon argues that parody is "a form of textual dialogism" (22). However, for parody to succeed aesthetically—and, I would add, politically and pedagogically—there needs to be, as Hutcheon observes, "both a recognition [by the reader/viewer] of that intent and an ability to find and interpret the backrounded texts in its relation to the parody." Some common denominators in definitions of parody include characteristics of irony and satire. Hutcheon argues that ironic inversion is a "characteristic of all parody"; that irony participates in "parodic discourse as a strategy"; and, in contrast to imitation, quotation, and allusion, that parody requires "critical ironic distance" (6, 31, 34). Hutcheon also proposes that satire uses parody for either expository or aggressive purposes and that both satire and parody imply critical distancing (43). However, satire usually makes a negative statement, whereas parody does not automatically imply a negative judgment (44).

4. In "The Post Always Rings Twice," Hutcheon uses the term unstable ironies to describe the disjunction between the verbal and visual aspects of a museum exhibit "Into the Heart of Africa." This Toronto exhibit of African artifacts attempted to critique colonialism—thus, the ironic allusion to Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. However, Hutcheon claims that the exhibit’s implicit critique of colonialism was not accessible to the general public and, consequently, serves as an example of the “failures” of postmodernist strategies of parody and irony. In a response to Hutcheon’s observations, Caughie argues that “no critique is ever free of the contradictory realities in which we teach, write, and act. There is no safe place from which to launch an oppositional critique” (118). Caughie urges educators and critics to engage unstable ironies and to exploit the double bind that such representations present.

5. All female reproductive functions—menstruation, pregnancy, menopause—were seen as inherently sick, and female psychology was viewed as an extension of female reproduction. The symptoms associated with hysteria included paralysis, convulsive seizures, depression, headaches, eating disorders, loss of voice, sexual longings, crying fits, fainting spells, choking, tics and twitches, deafness, and blindness (Showalter 14-15).

6. As Baer notes, “the hysterical body is already marked by its technological reproducibility . . . [and] forecloses any thoughts of physical purity which may be liberated through such a celebration of hysteria” (59-60). The spectator/spectacle pedagogical relation between male physicians and their female patients can be traced back to eighteenth-century images in science and medicine (Jordanova).

7. I thank Audrey Muriel Levasseur for the phrase “narcotic tongue tic” (personal correspondence).

8. I thank Paul John Eakin for this insight (personal correspondence).

9. I’ve appropriated the term hysterical spectators from Kirby’s discussion of male hysterics (116).
10. For a review of the social and historical consequences of the normative gaze and the classification of certain individuals and groups as "mad," see Bronfen; Foucault; Gilman; Gilman et al.; Ripa; and Showalter.

11. In many ways, Rosenblatt launched interest in the transactions between readers and texts. Her work is curiously absent in cultural studies scholarship on reading formations.

12. Written permission was obtained from students to use their writing in this article. All students' names are fictitious.

13. Jean-Martin Charcot, Désiré Magloire Bourneville, and Paul Regnard founded the journal *Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, which was devoted to documenting the hysteric (Gilman 197).

14. For a fascinating discussion of the relation of male hysteria to female hysteria, see Kirby's analysis of the historical connection between the "appearance of neurosis in male subjects and its apparent relation to railroad accidents, as well as 'shocking' accidents of a more generic industrial nature" (122-23).

15. In an effort to distinguish hysteria from earlier religious interpretations, Charcot defined hysteria as a hereditary physical defect or, in Showalter's words, a "traumatic wound in the central nervous system" (30). Nevertheless, Charcot's technique of searching for the stigmata suggests the diabolism and spectacle of the witch hunt (see Showalter 32).

16. This configuration resonates with Freud's supplement to the concept of repression in his trauma model of hysteria, which highlights the plasticity of memory and how repression involved "reversals, substitutions, and transpositions of images and ideas" (Haaken, "Recovery" 1076).

17. See Hesford's "Reading Rape Stories" for further discussion of the gendering and racialization of trauma in feminist documentary films and in classic psychoanalytic theory.

18. It wasn't until Freud that the disease moved from the area of gynecology to psychotherapy and was first linked to child sexual abuse. When ostracized by the medical community, however, Freud abandoned his theory of male incestuous desire in favor of a theory of infantile wish fulfillment. This revision shifted the focus from hysteric as victims of male power to perpetrators of their own fantasies. Freud thus reversed the plot of Oedipus—a story of masculine desire—in formulating the daughter’s desire for her father and repudiation of her mother (Kahane 283). However, in the case of Dora, Freud later appended the heterosexual plot of hysteria to reveal its essential bisexuality: the daughter's sexual desire for her father's love object, the mother (see Brennan).

19. In contrast to Freud's revised theory of hysteria as something perpetuated by women's unconscious sexual fantasies, more recent trauma models view the modern trauma survivor as someone who is responding in a rational way to externally imposed injuries. The trauma model has had progressive functions in challenging biological psychiatry, Freudian psychoanalysis, and in defending the "reality" of female complaints. However, as Haaken argues, often "feminists
and trauma therapists may tend to overlook the various conscious and unconscious strategies employed by women in their efforts to be heard and seen" (Pillar 62-63). Haaken argues that the trauma/dissociation model locks women's agency into a narrow psychological narrative that fails to recognize the role that fantasy and desire play in mental life. Fantasy and desire, according to Haaken, are "capacities that are fundamental to resisting patriarchal control and imagining a world beyond it" ("Recovery" 1071).

In this sense, Haaken, like Showalter, mourns the shift in the cultural discourse on sexual abuse from feminist contexts to therapeutic contexts. Haaken recognizes the role that fantasy plays in psychological life; however, she is far less dismissive of the recovered memory movement than, for example, Showalter, who tracks the ways in which hysterical plots acquire new meaning in contemporary culture. For instance, Showalter is critical of the recovered memory movement on the grounds that it narrowly constructs women as victims and falsely accuses innocent people. Drawing on research on memory and its plasticity, Showalter doubts the "validity of therapeutically recovered memories of sexual abuse" (147). Moreover, she characterizes the recovered memory movement as a contemporary form of hysteria, and she plots the movement on a continuum with other modern syndromes, including chronic fatigue syndrome, Gulf War syndrome, multiple personality disorders, satanic ritual abuse, and alien abduction. These syndromes and disorders do share common narrative elements and plots, and an ethos of individualism and rhetoric of personal injury. Showalter's conflation and pathologizing of these "syndromes" may appear to move beyond individualizing tactics; however, the claim that these "syndromes" originate in the psyche, configured here as a collective cultural psyche, does little to challenge the frames themselves. Showalter is at her best in Hystories when tracing the narrative trajectory of hysteria in literary texts and criticism. However, when she moves into the realm of medical discourse and its popularization, her analysis loses its force and focus. For example, in claiming that these modern syndromes are psychosomatic rather than physiological disorders, she glosses over the interrelation of the material and discursive realms. Her critique of modern "hysterical epidemics" fails precisely because of its lack of attention to the materiality of illness and its rhetoricity and how "hysterical narratives" are mobilized by various communities to serve a range of political and pedagogical agendas.

20. Roiphe's position on the phenomenon of date rape on the nation's campuses and the anti-rape movement is a vivid example of the "power feminism" version of this hysterical plot. Roiphe argues that what anti-rape feminists call a crisis of sexual violence on campuses is essentially a crisis in communication. According to Roiphe, the category of date rape has left college women and men confused about the ethics of sexual practices. The concept of date rape, she argues, re-victimizes women by reinforcing the idea that they are weak and thus in constant need of protection. Roiphe suggests that date rape is a fantasy concocted by "feminist prophets of the rape crisis [who] are talking
about something more than forced penetration. They are talking about rape as part of what is often referred to as a 'rape culture'" (Morning 56). Roiphe implies that women are suffering from false consciousness and that self-proclaimed victims are not real victims but rather victims of feminist hysteria. In this hysterical plot, feminist activism against violence (particularly its institutionalization as policy) is cast as the antagonist of female sexual agency, which, in this narrative, is cast in the role of protagonist.

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