

**Suburban Ghost Story:  
Pre-feminist Self-writing Practices  
and the Gothic in *Must Read After My Death***

**Papagena Robbins**

Allis's voice aches to be heard even years after her passing. She calls out desperately to a future listener. A listener who might be able to understand the chaos of her mid-twentieth century middle-class suburban American life more clearly than she could at the time. The moments of her anguish are now long past; the historical eras she lived through, her body, and her spirit are no longer present. And yet they resurface cinematically as a burning call to the present—she, too, was once immersed in life with the knowledge that one day it would all be over. Her voice haunts the home movie images of familial bliss that served during her life to conceal her suffering.



Morgan Dewa's experimental documentary, *Must Read After My Death* (2009)<sup>1</sup> brings together three of the most fascinating currents in turn-of-the-millennium nonfiction filmmaking: audiovisual self-writing practices, sometimes called first-person or auto- documentary; gothic interventions into the documentary tradition, or “gothumentary”;<sup>2</sup> and archive-based

**Papagena Robbins**, PhD, is a film and critical theory scholar, film festival curator, and university/college educator based in Montreal. She has theorized and created multiple film programs around the margins of documentary film expression, such as hybrid-documentary, gothic documentary, and essay film. She recently finished a lengthy study on urban archive-based filmmaking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in which she investigated the historiographical potential of the “city symphony in reverse”. She teaches in the Humanities department at Dawson College and in the Writing Centre at McGill University in Montreal.

filmmaking, also referred to as compilation or found footage. Like *Must Read*, films such as *Tarnation* (Jonathan Caouette, 2003), *Capturing the Friedmans* (Andrew Jerecki, 2003), *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005), *51 Birch Street* (Doug Block, 2005), *Photographic Memory* (Ross McElwee, 2011), *Our Nixon* (Penny Lane, 2013), and much of Alan Berliner's work (*Intimate Stranger* [1991], *Nobody's Business* [1997], and *First Cousin Once Removed* [2013]) have combined home movies, and/or other audio/visual personal archives, with the biographical and/or the autobiographical traditions to provide striking portraits of subjectivities that do not often, and sometimes never otherwise, find their way to the screen. The notion that home movies are capable of providing an archive of previously un(der)recognized evidence of, not only familial history, but also of "state iconography, and consumer technology" (Zimmerman 1995: ix), has made their (re)use and display for wider audiences relevant to the pursuit of the historiography of marginalized people on a more significant scale. Whereas home movies had once been thought irrelevant to all but the individuals contained within the recordings and, perhaps, their immediate family, over the past three decades cultural researchers, public historians, and filmmakers have found that the amateur archive presents an enormous potential to challenge dominant narrative models, especially around race, sexuality, gender, and class. Such challenges, however, require the interpretation of audio/visual amateur media that can be quite cryptic, often with few supporting materials. What makes *Must Read* distinctive within this context is Dews's incredible access to corroborating audiovisual materials of his subject(s) and his experimental arrangement of a familial/personal archive that employs the Gothic mode to critically expose key epistemological impasses around the auto/biographical, female agency, and the evidentiary mediums themselves. In the era of the ubiquitous selfie, *Must Read* demands that we consider the limits of historicity, gender, and medium in the representation of the (female) self.

The film proceeds chronologically to tell the story of one decade, 1961-70, in Allis's, her husband Charley's, and their four children's lives. Upon her death, Allis left to her family 50 hours of Dictaphone diaries and audio letters, some of which include the voices of the whole family; 201 home movies; hundreds of pages of written documents; and numerous family photographs. Filmmaker, Morgan Dews, Allis's grandson, composed *Must Read* entirely from Allis's personal archive, an archive that was largely unknown to the family before she passed away. The only additions Dews makes to the silent home movies and confessional audio recordings are sparse text to convey context overlaid upon the images, and an instrumental soundtrack inserted

beneath and between the collage of the family's archival audio recordings, which make up the film's only other narration.

Exploiting the indexical, emotional, uncanny and even figurative capacities of the recorded voice along with the more symbolic capacities of the photographic and moving image, *Must Read* reflects on the contradictions and confinements of female subjectivity in an era of profound, yet often obscured, patriarchal oppression. *Must Read* is a unique hybrid of the auto/biography (self-life-writing that incorporates a narrative of the life of another), the autothanatography (self-death-writing, providing an account of one's death), and the American Gothic modes. These narrative strategies are conveyed through a deceptively simple, but no less perceptive, use of several distinct media—here, photographic images, home movie footage, personal diary recordings, and recorded correspondence—arranged into an experimental documentary film. Through juxtaposition, the various audiovisual media here carry an uncanny effect, like multiple “voices” speaking for (and against) one subject, in contrast to the singular voice speaking for oneself, or for another, that is emblematic of the written tradition of life writing. Dews plays up the inherent uncanniness of various intermedial texts as they would be in the Gothic narrative.

Though Allis's story as represented in the film ends thirty years before her actual physical death, the “Death” evoked in the title (along with many other uncanny moments in the film) is a powerful semiotic agent that guides how we place the film within more conventional narrative discourses and traditions. Moreover, the film avoids pathologizing its subject by complicating the pervasive tendency towards imprisonment and hystericization of women within mid-century American middle-class narratives. Rather, a feminist critique emerges from its hybrid narrative strategy that shines a light on some of the most fundamental roadblocks to expression for self-writers in general, and for female self-writers in particular, which will be elaborated presently.

The hybrid representational strategy of auto/biography typically concerns texts that are autobiographical first and foremost, such that the author of the finished text seeks primarily to represent him/herself but acknowledges the need to represent others simultaneously in order to achieve such a self-representation. *Must Read* is no less a hybrid of the two forms—autobiography and biography—but reverses this strategy: the self-writing, or in this case, self-recording, is arranged to convey its author by another person who remains opaque within the narrative. The other family members speak to each other in the audio recordings, but only Allis speaks to “us”; that is, only she uses this aural medium as a form of self-writing. A text in which one subject has

initiated self-writing, but another—here, Allis’s grandson, Morgan Dews—has had to take over the representation of this material to tell the self-writer’s story provokes a different interpretive framework, especially after the death of the subject of representation. An interpretive framework more akin to the auto*thanatography* rather than the auto*biography*. In the case of *Must Read*, I argue that the specter of death evokes particular narrative traditions and philosophical issues that influence the interpretation of Allis’s self-writing and contribute to a feminist discourse on self-representation.

In her feminist theory of women’s self-representation, *Autobiographics* (1994), Leigh Gilmore draws our attention to the contradiction inherent in the perception that “woman’s writing” is “homelier” than “men’s writing,” given the wholly *uncanny* position of female subjectivity within the male-generated, and still dominated, autobiographical genre (1994: 2). She goes on to connect the exclusion of women in the development of autobiography to the male exclusive forms of identity and authority inscribed within the tradition, insisting that these manners of representation are inaccessible to, and unsuitable for, women. The autobiographical, as it has been thought and practiced by men, has rarely drawn upon and produced subjects whose authority was compromised significantly by their social/cultural environment—a commonality among female self-writers. According to Gilmore, the conventions of the genre have grown up instead around particular (white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied) subjectivities that could be considered stable, whole, and self-possessed within the dominant cultural frameworks of the “civilized” world. Gilmore argues that the autobiographical form has relied upon and reinforced a formula of self-writing in which the male subjectivity is strengthened within patriarchal systems at the expense of women; at its root, men reading stories solely of other men’s lives makes women’s self-expression ultimately incomprehensible, and even threatening (Gilmore 1994: 2).

In her book, *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autography* (1995), Jeanne Perreault argues that discourses of selfhood are inextricable from the effort to build feminist communities, while at the same time these abilities to write the self are dependent on the existence of a feminist “we”: “The processes that the texts of self-writing enact are not solitary or sovereign, and any discussion of a feminist ‘I’ must take into account the register of ‘we,’ a contested zone that resists definition but asserts its own existence” (5). Allis is on the crux of a feminist mode of being as she pursues her self-inscription practice in order to identify and understand herself as a woman, but without the social and narrative support of a feminist community, she relapses into moments of

resignation to the prescribed feminine role. Furthermore, her lack of a feminist “we” at the time she creates these documents keeps her self-inscription diaristic or confessional, and does not function as a communication to, with, or from the feminist “we” within her lifetime. Her missives may be redeemed, however, for our current feminist “we” by bringing them to bear on the theory and historiography of female self-writing and feminism.

The subgenre of *autothanatography* (literally, self-death-writing) may at first appear inappropriate to a text in which the self-writer is some 30 years away from a literal physical death, but I argue that death in its metaphoric and metonymic manifestations provide the guiding hermeneutic to *Must Read*. Metaphoric, given the repeated evocation of subtle, yet nonetheless present, Gothic tropes related to the simultaneity of death, life, and the undead, as well as the sense that the period recounted represents a kind of living death for Allis. Metonymic, because, though the various media utilized in the film’s assembly were created by living, not dying, people, the whole impetus for its construction into the filmic text through which we experience these lives is inexorably linked to the death of the original material’s creator, Allis, who clearly intended her dispatches to be “read” *after* her death. In this way, she herself packages her record as a form of speaking from a grave that she has literally not yet met, but figuratively into which she feels herself *already interred*. Thus, she is always already configured in relation to death from the start of the film.

While Allis’s story does not contain all of the typical elements of the *autothanatography* that Susanna Egan outlines in *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography* (1999)—that is, the material presented in *Must Read* was not created with the intention of documenting physical deterioration and death itself—there are many points of contact between *Must Read* and this life/death writing sub-genre. The necessity that another individual composes, edits, and submits the work of the self-writer after their demise makes *Must Read* closer structurally and theoretically to *autothanatography* than to any other mode of self-representation. Moreover, Allis’s decision to share, exhibit or make public upon her death the material presented in the film arguably stems from a similar end-of-life impulse, the crucial impulse which brings about the *autothanatography*, as Egan theorizes it: the need to take charge of one’s story in a manner of one’s own choosing. Allis’s decision to reveal her life, or aspects of her life, that are in conflict with dominant social and cultural mores implies that she felt the motivation that *autothanographers* share in their *being-towards-death* states: “They want to name their fear and helplessness,

their exact experiences of pain and degeneration, even their failures of character and charm. Crashing the barriers of tradition and taboo becomes for many of them a profoundly personal need” (Egan 1999: 196). The prospect of death’s approach provides some autothanatographers with the need to “come clean,” to utilize “this ultimate crisis of disconnection to reconnect” (Egan 1999: 197) and allows them the freedom to do so without experiencing possible negative repercussions from their society and those they love. It is also the last chance for “setting records straight, clearing old scores, avoiding misinterpretation,” thus influencing how the future will look upon the past (Egan 1999: 196).

Egan emphasizes agreement among autothanatography theorists that Heidegger’s notion of “‘being-toward-death’ [sic] is the only serious form of living” (Egan 1999: 199). This statement privileges autothanatographical stories for their unique perspectives on life gained through a close relationship with death: “Full awareness of mortality, from which most of us protect ourselves most of the time, generates a fullness of being to which these texts bear witness again and again” (Egan 1999: 199). Though Egan focuses on “being-toward-death” as an existential consequence of terminal illness, or the approach of a literal death scene, *Must Read* offers up the possibility of exploring this relationship of one’s own life to death as it occurs in the midst of life (as it had originally been theorized). Martin Heidegger created the concept of being-towards-death to play a crucial part in his major work on human ontology, *Being and Time* (1927). He theorizes the concept as a type of comportment gained through the moments of *angst* (more commonly, anxiety) that allow people, what he calls *Dasein*,<sup>3</sup> to experience their own mortality, leading to a deeper relationship to life from their acknowledgement of death, or more precisely, their acknowledgement of their own finitude, the finiteness of being. However, such moments of *angst* should not stem from the anticipation of one’s immanent death, according to Heidegger. These moments are essential to living a meaningful life throughout one’s lifetime.

*Angst* for Heidegger is the experience of realizing one’s own mortality. A being-towards-death state produces anxiety in *Dasein* because of the realization of *the possibility of the impossibility of existing* in the midst of existence. In acknowledging one’s own existence as a limited phenomenon, one realizes that the possibilities of living one’s own life are also limited, which is the basis for the anxiety of being-towards-death. How one lives one’s own life becomes an issue in the moment one conceives of his/her own possible non-existence. Heidegger warns, however, that “Anxiety in the face of death must not be confused with fear in the face of one’s demise” (1962: 295). Thus, while

“*Death is something that stands before us—something impending*” (emphasis in the original, Heidegger 1962: 294), being-towards-death is the individual’s relationship to herself in the face of her own negation, no matter when it may occur.

Since psychoanalysis and narrative theory require the concept of *the uncanny* to do significantly more work than the commonly used term, which refers to a kind of vague, unsettling feeling, I would like to take a moment to unpack the concept a bit before looking more closely at the film itself. In their simplest definition, *unheimliche* (German), “the uncanny,” and *l’inquiétude étrange* (typical French translation) or *extimité* (Jacques Lacan’s French translation, in which the intimate and its exterior coincide) convey the gripping sense of uneasiness, anxiety, or even panic that results from an internal estrangement. While psychoanalysis emphasizes how the recognition of the uncanny exposes our relationship to the dichotomies we create between inside and outside, narrative theory emphasizes specific literary tropes that emerge to undermine a totalizing worldview by blending binary oppositions (Dolar 1991: 6), such as, dead/alive (zombies, ghosts), me/you (the double), real/symbolic, animate/inanimate, public/private, and also, inside/outside. Both the psychoanalytic and narrative discourses evoke the uncanny to point to the need to understand the permeability of our perceptual constructs, for good or for ill. In this way, “the uncanny” acts as a critical concept through which, as Mladen Dolar explains, “[t]he status both of the subject and of ‘objective reality’ is ... put into question,” and “the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety” (1991: 6). In *Must Read*, the very form of the film exhibits this definition of the uncanny: vocalized subjective statements of the self are coupled with photographic imagery of predominately exterior images, ostensibly made to satisfy the demands of the outside world.

The film opens with Allis’s refutation of the identity of “housewife,” an identity the home movie images seem to convey without impediment throughout the film. She pleads: “I love my children. I want to be a good mother to them. But I’m not a person to sit around and sew and decorate and paint and do things like that. [*Impassioned*] I’m NOT a housewife. I have never BEEN a housewife.” (Figures 1-3) As she speaks, we see Super8 home movie footage of a child’s outdoor birthday party—what might be thought of as the pinnacle of the traditional housewife’s existence—and it is here that we find our bodily signifier for the voice: Allis proudly offering a large homemade cake to the camera in slow motion. “Sew and decorate and paint” is pronounced just as the cake comes into full view.



Figures 1-3

These words and images begin a film in which the voice maintains a continuous tension with the images that coincide with it. The images (misleadingly) convey a typical 1960's suburban middle class white American family, while the voices of all the family members that narrate the film—and especially Allis's—betray how readily subject to stereotypical judgment our visual interpretations are at every turn. In fact, *Must Read's* voice and image are often so disjointed that the audience is forced to recognize their incongruity; rather than experiencing the voice and image as supportive of the same narrative as we normal would when watching a documentary film, in *Must Read*, we must go between what we see and what we hear as two very different stories unfold around this family. On the one hand, the audio stream provides access to a perspective that issues from the different subjects' verbal expressions. On the other hand, how we interpret the visual stream connects the family's enunciations of identity to larger narrative systems, such as discourses around gender, family, class, nation, psychoanalysis, and the law. The disjunction between content in the audio and in the visual tracks suggests the audience consider an allegorical relationship between the two. Connections between the audio and visual are not always immediate, and never quite certain, in *Must Read*; instead voices and images yoke uncomfortably together, each haunting and holding in tension the knowledge claims the other presents.

Through Allis's initial declaration, we see that she is struggling to find a way to represent herself to herself, and possibly to others, such that she may be able to do some kind of justice to the kind of woman she understands herself to be. As we look at the home movie images, we are compelled to ask: Who is this woman if not a housewife? Were there any other ways of designating a married woman who stays home with four children in the sixties? What does it mean to renounce this role, even as you perform it? Is she in bad faith, or trapped in a world that provides no alternative narratives to her ostensible identity (housewife) through which she could see herself as an agent of her own existence? How do we interpret this apparent contradiction between the visual and verbal semiotic conclusions? They both come to us through highly indexical mediums, and yet from the very beginning Allis's declarations suggest that we must privilege one over the other, if only partially. If, for example, I privilege the visual, I see Allis as “a housewife,” but her claim that she is not, tells me she is unhappy in that role, or unsuccessful in it—and thus *she* becomes the pathology that creates the contradiction in my ability to interpret. If I privilege the vocal, I see Allis as a caged, female subject, struggling to live authentically in a world where she is, quite literally, *seen* to have but one role she can occupy—here, *the social order* is

the pathology. The editorial choice Dews makes when he opens the film with Allis's denial of the "housewife" identity crucially positions his primary (female) subject in an infelicitous relationship with the (Lacanian) gaze, the visible symbolic order.<sup>4</sup> Beginning the film in this way asks the audience both to recall discourses related to feminism and women in film, as well as to consider how the different layers of indexical material interact together.

Allis's voice is clearly at odds with its accompanied image throughout the film in ways that provide us with moments of reflexivity on the representational strategies at work to capture individual and familial life. Often, indexical documents indict each other concerning the limits of their particular modes of indexicality. For instance, when the vocal track reveals the complexity of characters that appear so simple and unproblematic in the visual record, we get the implicit sense of the image as a type of deception. In particular, the home movie and the family photograph come into question since these are the preferred mediums (and their use, the preferred strategy) for memorializing a family's history. Nancy K. Miller, writing about memoirs and mourning, offers some motivation for the challenge *Must Read* presents to our common methods of familial memorialization:

We tend to remember our childhood generically as if it were a home movie—birthdays, summer vacations, snowstorms. Video versions of domestic pastoral. The art of the memoir, we could say, extending the metaphor, entails reediting the movie, putting the pastoral up against history (1999: 51).

We remember our children and our own childhoods primarily through these means, which, in the era represented in *Must Read*, frequently had no synchronized soundtrack. These images, consciously or unconsciously, represent only the good times, *displaying* the integrity of the family unit, but do not and cannot convey an entirely accurate picture of the past—for this, as Miller points out, another layer of narrative must be added, one that provides the depth of time, place, and consciousness.

Super8 cameras were aggressively marketed towards women in the 1950s. The film technology was to be incorporated into familial life by "the woman of the house" as an extension of her domestic duties. The role of family documentarian and the home movie camera were, at the time, thought by many to be as important to the security of the nuclear family as "bomb shelters for civil defense—insurance against the insecurities of the future" (Zimmerman 1995: 134). While "[h]ome movies conscripted 'togetherness,'

family harmony, children, and travel into a performance of familialism,” a performance that “promoted the bourgeois nuclear family as the only social structure available for the expression of common, shared experiences that could shore one up against alienation and isolation” (Zimmerman 1995: 133), by contrast, audio recordings did not have the same social and cultural implications as the home movie and they permitted a more reflective and open representation of the family through the individual. Unlike the reel-to-reel audio recording technology introduced in the late 1940s, which was marketed similarly to the Super8 home movie camera as a technology that would facilitate the production of “an acoustic family album” (Bijsterveld and Jacobs 2009: 26), the Dictaphone, or “Voice Writer,” that is Allis’s primary vocal recording device, was marketed as an office supply, meant to compete with or complement the typewriter to aid in letter writing or note-taking (Morton 2000: 95). Intended for a single listener, the Dictaphone replicates the intimacy of the epistolary form, whereas the Super8, used as a memorialization device, became a means of performing the family for the social gaze. Allis takes home recording technology (mostly audio) into her own hands, as it were, to subvert the expectations that her record of events will serve the grand narratives with which she is clearly at odds. And, through his dissonant editing, Dews, for his part, reinforces his grandmother’s refusal to remain stuck as an object of this gaze.

For instance, in one sequence, Allis exclaims that she “stopped entertaining because after every dinner party, there was a fight.” She elaborates, “I hadn’t said the right thing, or I hadn’t done the right thing, or I had sat too long at the table, or something was wrong.” As she speaks, the photographs of Allis dressed in different cocktail attire, dancing and conversing happily with her party guests, remind the viewer to think more critically about the ability of the photographic image to tell the whole story. Allis informs us of her husband Charley’s excessive drinking. We hear an audio clip in which Charley belligerently demands that Allis “join the party,” and in the next breath makes an advance on another woman. Something is wrong here, but we cannot come to this idea through the visible evidence alone.

If in the above instance the imagery can be held up as deceptive, there are other ways that the visual record in *Must Read* proves to hold personal accounts in check. When the stories the family members record need to be brought into question, the visual track is employed to disrupt the face value of the testimony provided. The visual commentary does not function to contradict the claims of the speaking subject so much as to complicate the

speaker's ability to fully comprehend his/her contingency within a larger social/historical framework. For example, towards the end of the film, we encounter Allis's sobbing voice, wondering what went wrong with the family. After recounting her therapist, Dr. Lenn's assessment that all has gone to hell, she cries, "I WANT OUT! ... If the kids are going through this anguish and this unhappiness, and this is all that lies ahead for them, God, I—I can understand people who kill their children rather than have them live like this. I just don't have the courage to do it, just end it all." The image accompanying these words is an extremely slow motion shot of the backs of a woman and two children behind her wading out away from the camera in a natural body of water. (Figure 4) The image of a woman leisurely taking her children out to sea connects Allis's desperation with the notorious occurrences of women with little potential to change their circumstances who have chosen infanti- or filicide through drowning. Allis feels alone in this impulse. And yet the visual track makes the audience feel that she is not. She is part of a larger narrative picture, one that contains strong Gothic overtones, even as we comprehend that this home movie footage is not actually a record or reconstructed depiction of filicide. Indeed, it shows a typical day at the beach. Nevertheless, we are unable to ignore the sinister suggestion.



Figure 4

In addition to the use of photography, moving image, and audio recording, text plays an interesting part in this polyvocal, multimedial, familial auto/biography. Through on-screen text the filmmaker presents an exceptionally spare chronological account of the family's life in the 1960s.

Here, the biographical design of the film is indicated through the presentation of a narrative element produced by another person (Dews) not represented in the story, an element which is decidedly restrained in the amount of information it contributes to the story.<sup>5</sup> The consistent use of subtitles for every bit of audio recording used in the film, however, utterly overwhelms the director's meager expositional text. Appearing as though a natural and vital element within the film, these subtitles are often necessary for comprehension due to the slightly distorted audio quality and the emotional speakers' frequently inarticulate speech. Still, there is more to the function of the textual in the film than simply to aid in the identification of verbal signification. The subtitles succeed in projecting an even greater authority onto the voice. By forcing the audience to engage with the voice on two levels of mediation, aurally and visually, and taking the audience's attention away from the imagery to some extent, the subtitle text buttresses the voice, stabilizing its transmission and affirming its significance. The perspective of the narrative is clearly given over to the voices of the family members, specifically to Allis, bringing the audience into the fold, and ultimately emphasizing the autobiographical over the biographical—Allis's narrative, filled with emotional and personal authority, over that of Dews's, which is confined to juxtapositions, transitions, and contextualizing chronologies.

Allis records her most "unspeakable" thoughts in secret for the majority of the film, seemingly somewhere in the depths of her suburban home. Where is she? In the basement? The attic? The bathroom? Where can she find the space to speak her truth? She appears trapped within the family, her gender, the historical period, and this house. She is submerged deep within a faulty structure. Wherever she has had to seclude herself in order to be able to express herself would be best represented by the figure of an attic in which a woman has been cloistered. The attic does not appear, but it is felt throughout the film. The feeling of claustrophobia, doom, and desperation that such a cloistering invokes in the imagination is the closest analogy that comes to mind when conjuring Allis's bodily and spatial presence through her voice. Her voice emerges from a place on the brink of death, even an undead, purgatorial place, which contributes one of many uncanny elements to this strange, hybrid, American Gothic narrative. Gubar and Gilbert's 1979 study of the Gothic narrative's focus on the trope of the "madwoman in the attic" (also the book's title) does not offer an exact parallel with Dews's domestically dislocated positioning of Allis, but the trope itself is a powerful element of the Gothic's feminism, presenting a female character whose voice is so buried in the architecture and narrative (often under layers of narratives told by others)

that she exists in the main narrative as a kind of ghost. The classic example of the trope is, of course, Bertha in *Jane Eyre*.<sup>6</sup> Late in the film, we come to discover, through Allis's voice-over, that many of the tapes in which she alone is speaking, in which she intensely confides all her secrets to the recording apparatus, were in fact recorded in her car, a location that is both an inside and an outside space. (Figure 5) Her spatial and bodily presence then shift to a place where borders have been dissolved and she floats freely in her cage through the suburban backwaters. The liminal outside/inside space of the car further represents an uncanny type of freedom in which the domestic sphere is both escaped and extended.



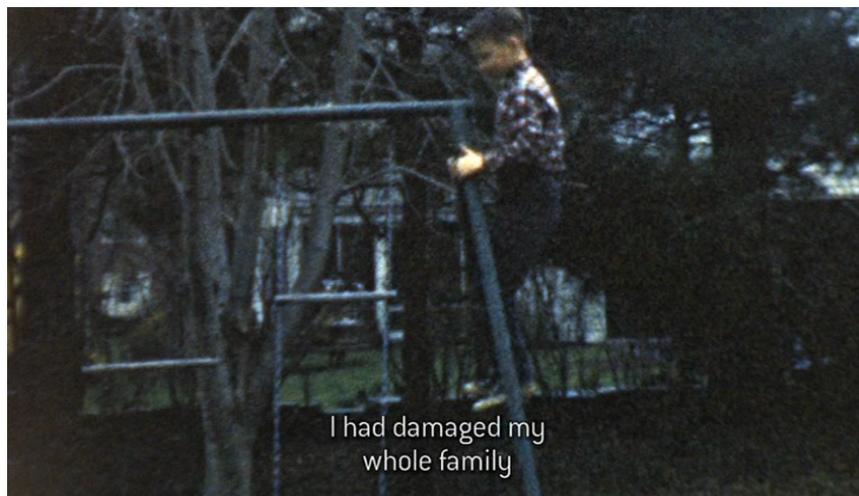
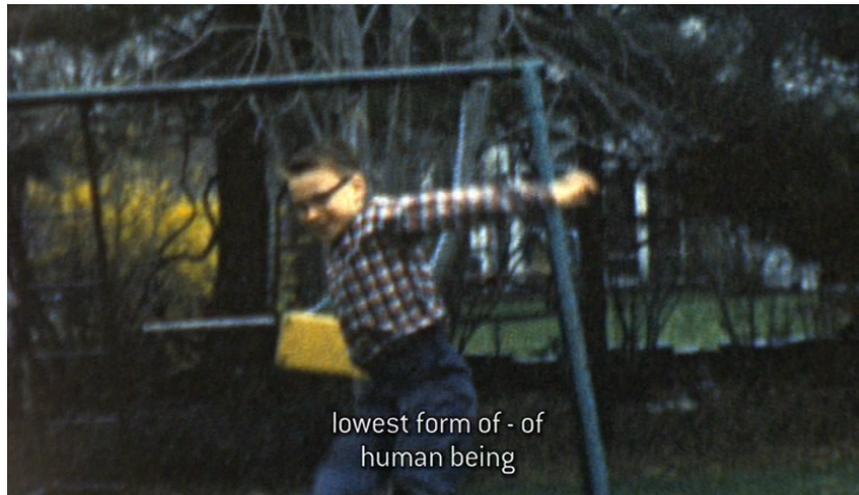
Figure 5

In one sequence, an argument between one of the children, Bruce, and his father, Charley, about the family's budget is recorded. Young Bruce identifies Charley's expenditure on "vices" as a major drain on the family budget and asks that he cut it down by one quarter. Bruce screams that he is not being heard, as does Allis. Charley shouts them both down, asserting his absolute authority within the house. This scene is carried out over a slow pan across an unpopulated living room decorated for Christmas. We are inside but the voices in conflict are not properly inhabiting the space of the interior of the home represented by the photographs and Super8 moving-images because we cannot find a visual referent for the impassioned voices. Moreover, the coziness of Christmas has been disrupted by the vocal presence of the family in turmoil. What conveys the uncanny feeling here is the coincidence of inside

and outside, absence and presence, in an empty room full of voices. The vocal track is simultaneously within the picture, and the space it represents, as well as outside of it. These voices and their concerns coincide with the image—that is, we attribute the space we see to them—and yet there is nothing to indicate their co-temporality. Together, voice and image in this sequence evoke an uncanny flicker of human existence in space and time.

Dolar makes the case that the phenomenon of uncanny eruptions in narrative can be historically situated as a crisis in (or even a complement to) modernity, resulting from the Enlightenment's attempt to rid civilization of structures that previously dealt with paradoxes such as the reconciliation of the principle on non-contradiction (1991: 7). That is, in formal logic, it is not possible to say that something is both one thing and its opposite at the same time ( $A = B$  and  $A \neq B$ , simultaneously). However, in art, as with the Gothic uncanny, it is possible. Significantly, he points to the proliferation of uncanny figures, “[g]hosts, vampires, monsters, the undead dead,” as “the surprising counterpart” to Kant's establishment of transcendental subjectivity (Dolar 1991: 7). Rationalism has stripped the individual of its messy, empirical, irrational, castrated, and desiring subjectivities for all practical and political purposes, and these aspects of life struggle for expression as a result. The two discourses that attempt to bring these dimensions back into subjectivity are the Gothic tradition and psychoanalysis.<sup>7</sup>

There are moments in *Must Read* when Allis's unconscious is positioned as some kind of evil twin, or double self, haunting her, possessing her even, in an attempt to corrupt and destroy the “good,” “pure,” and “whole” other members of the family, the father, Charley, and their children. After her 14 year-old son, Bruce, is committed to a psychiatric institution, Allis cries into the Dictaphone as she recounts her and her son's psychiatrist's assessment that she had intentionally and vengefully turned her son, Douglas, against his father: “Dr. Lenn today made me sound like the lowest form of, of human being that I can imagine. He said that I have damaged my whole family, that I would have killed myself rather than do it consciously, but that unconsciously I had done it.” The image we see as she says these words is of her son innocently, yet perilously, jumping and playing (Figures 6-7). Here, instead of putting some responsibility on the more privileged members of the system, Dr. Lenn uses the psychoanalytic discourse of the period to convince Allis that she is not in control of her actions, nor does she know her own mind, and yet somehow, she is still paradoxically responsible for all that happens around her. Dr. Lenn plants the seed in her that her dirty, scheming unconscious mind is undermining her and her family's lives.



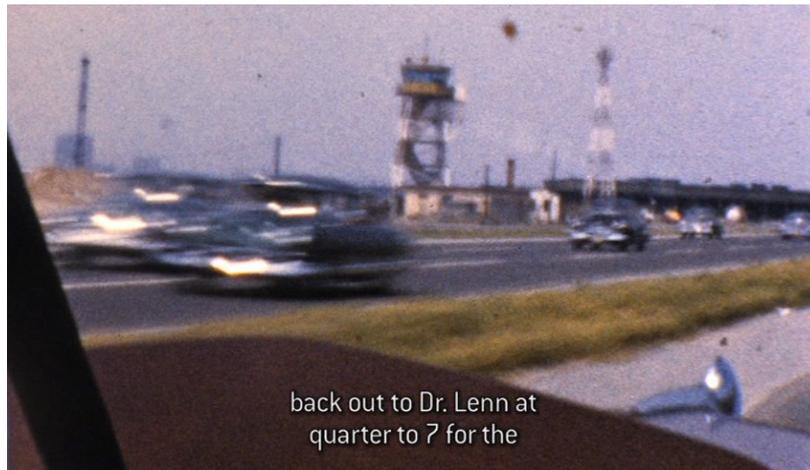
Figures 6 & 7

At another point in the film, we hear the voice of a male counselor of some sort (a departure from the family-only vocal narration that dominates the film) promoting the notion that in order to be a “good” wife/mother, a woman must “interpret the leadership” of her husband to the children, presumably through overt obedience to him. We then hear Allis recounting her visit to Dr. Lenn during which time he has told her to be submissive to her husband whether she believes he is right or wrong. Though at many other times in the film she passionately disagrees with such suppression of her

agency, here, she seems relieved at this advice, as though the burden of thought has been taken off her shoulders. Perhaps she is tired of fighting, and to accept her subjectivity as a pathology—even remarking that she thinks she has been in a “more serious psychological condition than she realized”—allows her to put down the fight. To be sure, she seems happy at the prospect of being dispossessed of the demonic, disobedient woman who threatens to destroy the family. This eradication of her “evil” double, and the religiousness with which she visits the enigmatic authority, Dr. Lenn, makes her psychoanalytic treatment appear more like an exorcism than a rational, voluntary, and participatory adult therapy.

The visual accompaniment to this sequence works to undermine Allis’s newfound peace, which, after all, has come through her acquiescence to the patriarchal order. For over two minutes, as Allis affirms her commitment to inhabiting her “better” self, rambles about all of the appointments the family has with Dr. Lenn, and expresses how content she is with his suggestions, we see footage of highways cut into other highways, as if we are aimlessly hurrying to get nowhere. The view from the vehicle is almost too modern—there are too many overpasses, big shiny 1950s/60s era cars, factories, power lines, bridges—in short, nothing to look at but signs of brute, ugly, masculine technological “progress” (Figures 8-10, this page and next). We may suppose that Allis is on the run, or at least her “fugitive self” is.<sup>8</sup> Choosing to follow this winding road draws her into an existential void that makes us wonder how it might be possible for Allis to find her way back to herself with the kind of “treatment” she is receiving. The juxtaposition of imagery and voice suggests that Allis has only gone deeper into the labyrinth.





Figures 8-10

How can she tell us who she is if she accepts Dr. Lenn’s advice that she make her sole purpose in life to be only for others? If our protagonist were inhabiting the classic “hero’s journey,” such a loss of autonomy or identity would appear as a temporary setback within the overall quest for liberation and enlightenment. But the chances for such an exultant outcome are slim to none within the social/cultural forces that circumscribe Allis. The Gothic narrative makes significant use of this quest-for-self trope as well, usually leaving its protagonists frazzled and bereft of solutions. In the female Gothic, we also find a setback such as this before the heroine finds her “true” path, which often finds her in a reconstituted domestic arrangement—better than before, but still stuck. Is this outcome the best we can hope for? In other parts

of the film, both before and after this point, Allis is as self-possessed and clear about her values as they come. In one scene, she identifies herself unhesitatingly as a non-conformist: “I think it is a wrong civilization or a wrong culture that requires you to conform in order to do anything,” she asserts. In another scene, she refuses to have her son committed to a psychiatric institution upon the recommendation of his psychiatrists because she does not want to give them that kind of authority over her son. While speaking about her son’s issues regarding doctors and school, she voices the desire to take the children into the mountains to let them grow up away from the civilization she believes is poisoning them. She is defiant at many moments, but then later reprimands herself for causing problems in the house. A common trope in the American Gothic tradition, the “fugitive self” is D.H. Lawrence’s term for denoting that part of the persona in the American literary character that comes roaring out of the unconscious as a response to oppressive forces: “Lawrence’s ‘fugitive,’ ... returns to the house of the American ideal persistently; it has a deeply familiar but thrown-off story, a history, that insists upon being told, however indirectly” (Savoy 2002: 171). To see Allis’s moments of defiance and rage, and intermittent contrition within and against a system that traps her as a fugitive helps to position Allis’s oscillation between compliant and uncompromising within the narrative, not as a sign of a sick or dangerous individual, but as a symptom of the restrictive and contradictory culture she attempts to inhabit. Isn’t this “fugitive self,” of which Dr. Lenn attempts to rid Allis, the very self that fights for her own “I” and allows her to speak to us as a subject?

As Eric Savoy contends, the American Gothic “embodies and gives voice to the dark nightmare that is the underside of ‘the American dream’” (2002: 167). Nevertheless, it is important not to essentialize by dividing dream and nightmare into binary oppositions, Savoy warns; but rather, it is better to understand how they function in their mutual dependence (2002: 167). *Must Read* is particularly adept at creating this incontrovertible dialectic between dream and nightmare. In an exceptionally chilling scene, one of the sons, Bruce, yells at his father for blaming Allis for the children’s disobedience. Bruce accuses Charley: “You take it out on mom. You say: ‘these are your kids. You brought them up wrong.’” Charley protests and denies the accusation. Allis interjects affirming that he had said it that very evening. Charley warns the group sternly: “I would suggest a very different approach here.” Bruce bursts out: “NO! YOU’RE gonna tell the truth!” Charley says to Allis: “You’re going to destroy this family, no matter what happens.” Bruce passionately defends his mother: “She is not going to destroy the family! She

does not yell! You yell!!” The images throughout the entire argument consist of shaky pans across the fronts of various suburban houses, conveying an eerie sense of the unknown traumas that could be lurking behind any of the doors of these suburban family homes. After Bruce’s last outburst, the voices are stopped and the camera slowly, and unstably, makes circles around the front of one house from a fixed viewpoint. This juxtaposition of a lingering and intensifying image with the silence after a domestic disturbance conveys the descent into the hellish alienation that presumably existed, secretly, in the context of the suburban American dream of the 1960s. These are truly haunted houses, made all the more chilling by the non-fiction narrative strategies of auto/biography and documentary employed to depict them.

Tropes that have marked the Gothic since the early nineteenth century in terms of mood or tone include, “claustrophobia, atmospheric gloom, the imminence of violence”; in terms of setting, “the haunted house, the prison, the tomb”; and in terms of plot elements, “the paternal curse and the vengeful ghost” (Savoy 2002: 168). *Must Read* arguably possesses many, if not all, of these markers of the Gothic, while remaining consistent with, though at the margins of, documentary and auto/biographical traditions. None of these traditions are particularly stable here, nor do any of them project a consistent central representational strategy to guide the film. In fact, the film, like Allis seems in search of a proper mode to convey the despair, anger, frustration and longing here. This search for the proper form is endemic to the Gothic narrative and *Must Read* adopts them to unsettle the certainty of the text just as it parallels Allis’s struggle to find a voice that resonates. Savoy asserts, “American Gothic is, first and foremost, an innovative and experimental” narrative form already (Savoy 2002: 168). Thus, *Must Read* indeed, as its title urges, requires its audience to *read*, or to interpret, its hybrid narrative development using a multitude of discursive, textual, and media literacy strategies. This dissolution of the boundaries of its rhetorical strategies further adds to the uncanniness of the film by placing the viewer in the position of having to rely on unstable architecture to make meaning.

Savoy quotes Leslie Fiedler’s claim in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) that “the whole tradition of the Gothic might best be grasped as ‘a pathological symptom rather than a proper literary movement’” (Savoy 2002: 168). If Gothic storytelling is characterized by its ability to be symptomatic of a culture’s pathologies, then there is something of the actual, or real, fighting for its expression in Gothic narratives that is capable of exhibiting itself despite the efforts of the dominant order to repress such dissenting, or unharmonious, elements. Thus, it should not appear too curious that non-

fiction forms which rely on their ability to convey a “true” historical reality may also find affinities with Gothic patterns, which have done the work of structuring troubling “pathological symptoms” in tales of warning for centuries. In fact, Savoy himself emphasizes the *historiographic* quality of the Gothic, uniquely adapting itself to “circle around themes and events that are rarely susceptible to direct exposition” (Savoy 2002: 168-9). By combining the Gothic and the auto/biographical, *Must Read* asks us to pay attention to the symptomatic in self-writing and biography as they attempt to relay subjective and “objective” accounts, respectively, of contingent beings.<sup>9</sup>

The primary symptom that *Must Read* illuminates is that of the female subject who attempts to realize herself within the context of powerful and oppressive technologies of the self. In the second half of the film, Allis refers often to her psychiatrist, Dr. Lenn’s patriarchal advice, although she does not seem to recognize it as such. “I don’t know what to do. Dr. Lenn says that when a man marries, he wants a woman with a capital W. He wants a woman to be pretty and be a hostess, and bolster his ego, and keep a calm happy house for him, and I’ve done a rotten, stinking job of that! And I’m not a woman with a capital W,” Allis sobs. She is deeply shamed by her psychiatrist. There is a strong sense that she believes she has sinned in her “failure” to be this *Woman with a capital W*. Earlier, Allis wonders why other people’s expectations of her personality have changed so radically. “I must have been a very nasty little girl,” she says, “‘cause I wouldn’t take any guff from anybody. And yet, they all liked me, and they all loved me. So I don’t quite see what’s happened since then. I guess people don’t like that kind of a person, really” (Figure 11). And in another scene, Allis remarks that the basic problem between herself and Charley is that they have different values, but “according to Dr. Lenn, Charley HAS to live by his values. My values are more permissive.” In moments like these, when Allis must reflect on the terms of her own subjectivity—representing it to herself, representing it to others—the autobiographical form comes into question as a possible mode of representation for women whose “I”s have been undermined by a social structure that makes every effort to erase their agency.



Figure 11

“I can’t recognize my own voice on this machine of yours,” Allis says in the beginning of the film. “It sounds entirely strange and very Hepburnish or something like that.” Though the estrangement we feel at hearing our own recorded voices is a common phenomenon, her words take on a symbolic meaning in relation to the existential crisis we witness her experiencing throughout the film. She points out that the apparatus, the Dictaphone, is “yours,” referring to her husband, Charley. Not only is she unable to recognize herself by her own recorded voice, to hear herself as she perceives herself, but the very device through which she could potentially come to know herself better is felt to be alien to her as it is owned by another person, someone more privileged than she—she who cannot even own the technology of her self-representation. Furthermore, this “Hepburnish” quality she refers to, a shaky quality in the voice, is a possible indication of uneasiness in the face of an attempt at self-representation with such alien(ating) tools.

In her book *Technologies of Gender* (1987), Teresa de Lauretis evokes a similar conceptualization of “Woman with a capital letter,” which she defines as a flat amalgamation of the varied, but limited, representations of patriarchal femininity. But for de Lauretis the saliency of creating this notion of “Woman with a capital letter” is to be able to negotiate one’s difference from it and find a voice of one’s own (1987: 9-10). Allis is torn throughout the film between the imperative to inhabit this identity of *Woman with a capital W*, and her own strong inclination to reject it. Allis’s self-reproach around the inability to inhabit this idealized identity is constructed within the narrative as a betrayal to the dynamic agency and multifaceted identity Allis proclaims at the start of the

film, when she insists that she is “not a housewife.” As such, the studied introspection of this self-reproach is a shocking reversal in the narrative, thwarting Allis-as-protagonist’s progress toward pursuing a subjective position from which to tell her own unique story, and certainly differentiating her self-inscription from the heroic, largely male tradition of the autobiographical.

Allis performs the disabling effects of attempting to think, to speak, and to write oneself as a woman in an extremely polarized, gendered culture. As someone who feels she cannot occupy the position of (what she and others in her cultural environment believe to be) the only legitimate, authentic, female subjectivity for her time—*Woman with a capital W*—Allis cannot assume the proper role of “author” within her text or speech. The irony is that, were Allis to be able to assume this “proper” subject position offered to her by the patriarchal regulating mechanisms around her, she would not be able to think, speak, or write herself with authority in any case since it is a requirement of *Woman with a capital W* to vacate her existential concern in order to be complete in her ability to provide support to others. In fact, the crucial feature of *Woman with a capital W* is that she have *no* existential concern for herself. (In William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* [1930], for instance, the mother refers to herself in the plural because of her children—she refuses a narrative existence apart from her maternal role, even in death.) *Woman with a capital W* is a silent woman. Allis’s words then become uncanny once more in the sense that they emerge from a “castrated” subject who has nowhere else to turn for legitimation of her perspective. In these moments, it seems as if the outside world has invaded her striving sense of self and dismantled it. She is trapped in language, neither able to say “I” and mean it, nor to occupy the structures available for her to express the status of her double bind. As she speaks these words of failure, her choking voice conjures up a bodily image of a woman bound and gagged, appearing uncannily closer to the “Death” in the title than she physically is at this point in her life. As a subject of representation, Allis cannot inhabit the autobiographical properly, which Gilmore asserts is true for women in general, but instead she is thrust into a newer off-shoot of the genre, a sub-genre that does not seek the representation of whole, comfortable, secure subjects, focusing rather on the fragile beings we are when our mortality looms large—the autothanatography.

The desperation of Allis’s captivity, which conveys precisely this Heideggerian *angst*, is captured in a short sequence where she goes from speaking about her previous life of adventure to her present loss of direction and ownership of her life. “Your father is very jealous of my years in Europe, of my first marriage, of my singing, anything pertaining to this,” she reveals to

her son. Photographs appear of a young Allis on European streets feeding pigeons, a portrait with another man and a little boy (evidence of a previous marriage), ending with a close-up on her youthful, smiling face that eerily seems to be both a photograph and a slowly moving image simultaneously, as the corners of her mouth turn slightly upward while the whole picture shimmers. The still and moving images combine uncannily to disintegrate the boundaries between stillness and movement. The photograph, as a dead object, is reinfused with life by this delicate movement, punctuating the memory of a more fulfilling existence. Indicating the intensity of her existential crisis, Allis continues: “And I got to the point where I wasn’t interested in volunteer work anymore. I didn’t want to do it, and I don’t want to do it. But neither do I want to just sit around the house and do housework. And, I’m not a bridge-playing female. And, I’m not going out to coffee klatches [German for a social gathering around coffee], so what DO I do with my time?” The following is spoken over moving images of a dog with tiny puppies suckling from her, clearly signifying the type of role from which she envisions herself fleeing. She finishes her thought:

Now, the next question is, do I have the right to take the time from the family to do anything? I’ve got to find something at which I’m successful. I have gotten to the point at which I am breaking under not having success. And I cannot point out anywhere in my life, in 55 years, that I have had success.

By going back in time to this period of crisis in Allis’s life, there is a strong impression that she truly is aware of her own mortality, her troubles stemming from the desire to live fully in a world that seems to project definite and immutable roles upon her. The crisis ends, as does the film, with the death of her husband, Charley, in 1970, which releases Allis from the most burdensome role of her life—the role of wife. With the death of this role, we are told in text that the audio recordings stop. Allis speaks no more. Charley’s cause of death is unclear; all we know is that he was found dead next to his bed two days after (illicitly) reading a letter Allis had written to her psychiatrist detailing her feelings about Charley. Because of the circumstances of Charley’s death, we are left to infer that either Allis has found peace and no longer needs to record herself, or that she has become so traumatized by her guilt that she loses her voice completely. Many questions hover in the ending credits, however. Does Allis’s release from the captivity of (one of) her feminine role(s) give her the liberty to live fully? Does the cessation of self-writing stop

because she is now at peace, as we hope? Or, perhaps the death of her husband merely created yet another role for her in the patriarchal order—widow. And now, middle-aged and left alone to care for her two remaining children, she must continue living in a male-controlled system that cares little about her self-realization.

“The specter of death hovers over all autobiography, usually unnamed,” Egan observes (1999: 19). Autobiography depends upon the possible, probable, and inevitable negation of its subject; it requires this specter to propel the subject into the necessary state of anxiety, and care about individual existence, needed to document oneself for the present and the future. What *Must Read* contributes to autothanatography is a text that represents the haunting of life by death and mortality, which autobiography should be able to display if it is to be entirely candid, but generally declines to make explicit. Thus, “writing towards one’s death” could be reconceived within autothanatographic theory to include texts resulting from the moments of life filled with Heideggerian *angst* in which an existential crisis plays itself out on the self-representational scene.

Dews constructs a narrative in which the mysterious Dr. Lenn is a shadowy figure throughout the film. Each member of the family goes to see him and yet the family continues to degenerate. Since he does not appear in the film, yet exerts considerable influence on the subjects that do, his mystery and power contribute to reading him within the Gothic narrative tradition as a shadowy villain. Victorian Gothic is particularly relevant in this case as its narratives often feature persecuted female protagonists (here Allis fits this role quite well), ineffectual heroes (her husband, Charley, who does not support her attempts at self-actualization) and dastardly villains (the reports around Dr. Lenn indicate a clearly patriarchal agenda and his authority seems to be beyond reproach).

Links between Allis and the Gothic figure of the persecuted woman are rather appropriately applied, given that she is truly trapped in the roles provided by her cultural era. Though not ill, psychologically or physically, she cannot explore life. Death appears near at times when one cannot move, cannot see ahead, and cannot be heard. Her last speech act, “MUST READ AFTER MY DEATH,” the words she scrawls across the manila envelope holding her deepest secrets, presumably containing her wish that her audio-recordings and home movies be seen and heard, leads to a film in which she is at once always living and always dead (Figure 12). With this narrative, it truly is as if she has been buried alive in a way that only cinema can present because of the way it comprises both narrative and indexicality. Thus, just as the

confessional voices haunt the familial images in *Must Read*, just as the inevitability of death haunts the being-towards-death, and just as every woman's experiences of injustice within patriarchy haunt gender divisions today, the tension and anxiety produced through the repression of hidden truths haunts the stories we tell about ourselves.

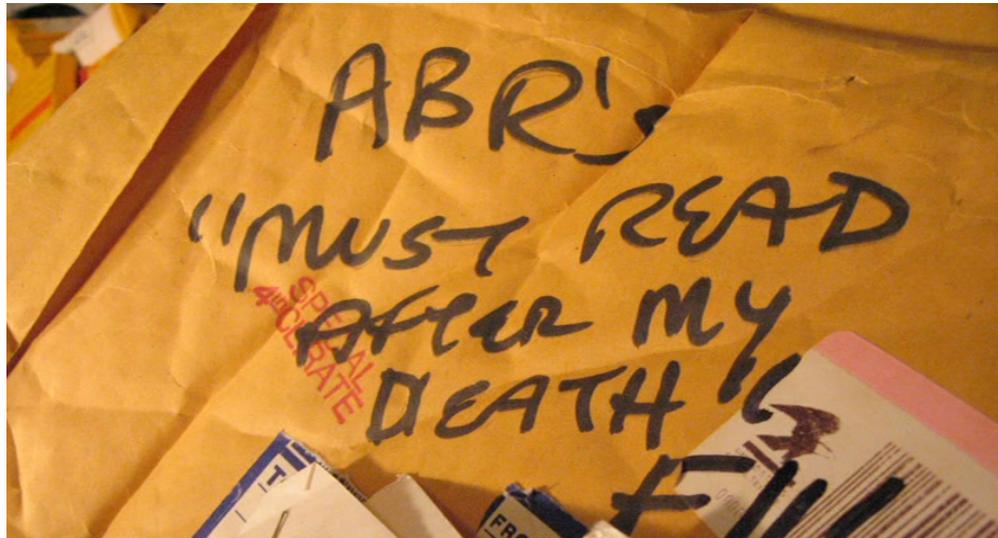


Figure 12

Allis cannot form the coherent, stable “I” needed for autobiographical practices of self-inscription because she has no access to the “we” of a socially acceptable female identity that is not strictly in relation to the roles of wife and/or mother. In her recordings she strives and fails to find this narrative identity from which she can inscribe her subjectivity and tell her own story as stable and heroic, as the autobiographical tradition implicitly mandates. Much like the Gothic figures of the ghost, the persecuted heroine, and the amorphous subjective narrator, Allis is frightfully alone in her quest to communicate a selfhood. We receive her urgent cries as a haunting of the cultural memory of the postwar American suburban middle class. The critique of the pre-feminist paradox around self-writing in *Must Read* provides additional support around the need for continuing feminist self-writing practices, and simultaneously asks the viewer to consider where women are today within that project.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As of April 2019, *Must Read After My Death* can be watched in its entirety on the filmmaker's personal website: <http://morgandews.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> For a deeper sense of what is meant by "gothumentary" please see "'Gothumentary': The Gothic Unsettling of Documentary's Rhetoric of Rationality," co-authored by myself and Kristopher Woofter.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger classifies the kind of beings that we are as *Dasein*, literally "Being-there." The reason he coins a new word for his ontological exploration of what would otherwise be called "man" (at the time) or "human beings" now, Heidegger scholar Richard Polt contends, is to push his reader to consider this subject/object of investigation anew. See, Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction*. 1998. London: UCL Press, 31.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1994), Jacques Lacan theorizes the *gaze* as a metaphor for seeing oneself as if inscribed within a picture such that you see yourself as society sees you in relationship to everything around you. The subject's meaningful positioning within this metaphoric picture is based on visual signs that carry social significance, such as age, race, gender, and class.

<sup>5</sup> Given Dews's close relationship to the subjects of representation, that he maintains total restraint from inserting himself into the story is unexpected and shows an intentional decision to keep the focus on the nuclear family, and Allis in particular.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Kristopher Woofter for this apt observation.

<sup>7</sup> Though I would love to pursue a richer psychoanalytic analysis of this film, the scope of this paper does not permit me to go into any further depth in this regard.

<sup>8</sup> D.H. Lawrence's "the fugitive self" is explained and examined further below.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, *Must Read* manages this critical combination of the Gothic and the auto/biographical so well that it was instrumental in helping me and my co-author, Kristopher Woofter, to theorize the intersection of the Gothic and documentary traditions in a previous article on the concept of the "gothumentary." (See note #2).

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