"A NEGATIVE PLEASURE"

SUICIDE’S DIGITAL SUBLIMITY

An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art.

ALBERT CAMUS, ON SUICIDE,

The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays

In the midst of the classic documentary Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927, Walther Ruttmann), a strange and significant fictional moment intrudes. The film thus far has been a lively tour of this modern city, capturing all manner of urban sights: the desolate streets at daybreak, masses of citizens pouring in and out of train stations, the briskness of machine labor in factories, weddings and funerals, lunchtime at the zoo. But now the sky darkens, the wind luffs out café awnings and fiercely swirls dead leaves. Offering no establishing shot, Ruttmann cuts to the tightly framed body of a woman leaning precariously far over a bridge railing. A point-of-view shot follows, with a straight-down look at the churning water below, before Ruttmann returns us to the woman with increasingly close shots of her crazed, tormented expression. We see an object drop into the river with a splash that alerts passersby, who swarm at the railing
and scan the surface of the water. The woman does not reemerge, nor does any ripple linger. Indeed the water’s violent churning has subsided, as it flows lazily past the struts of the bridge.

While other scattered snippets of Berlin hint that they could have been staged or reenacted, the bridge jumper scene is the film’s only overt departure from a strict documentary mode. It exudes the feeling of a staged event with its impossibly positioned close-ups, the woman’s exaggerated performance, its brief shot of the “jump” that does not look like a body falling into the water, and the sheer improbability of capturing this event using available film technology. The jarring intrusion of this conspicuously staged moment within Ruttmann’s actuality footage speaks to the strong desire to record “real death” that chapter 1 traced through the history of film and photography. In the particular case of public suicide, the idea that a camera might glimpse the emotional decision to end one’s life and the ensuing dramatic plunge was obviously compelling to Ruttmann, as much as it may feel unseemly to viewers. His inability to document an actual suicide and recourse to a fictional mode is also consistent with the technological difficulty of recording such an act in 1927. Because a documentarian could not know when the next attempt would be made, their best option would be to stake out a bridge and keep the camera ever ready to roll when a pedestrian appeared to contemplate the drop. But to burn through pricey film stock monitoring an individual who might jump off the bridge would be a costly endeavor. There would be no chance of setting up an unattended camera to run automatically because of the era’s short rolls of film and need for manual adjustment with varying light levels and focus settings. To staff and supply this hypothetical operation would, in other words, be prohibitively expensive and impractical.

Advancements in moving image technology since 1927 have radically changed the status of that hypothetical operation. Chapter 2 noted that video and digital video (dv) make newly affordable and practical the act of waiting for a natural death to occur with a camera rolling, and chapter 4 will demonstrate that the saturation of public space with digital recording devices has produced a dramatic increase in documentation of violent death. The case of recording public suicide at bridges where such acts are known to occur straddles these two scenarios of documenting death. Like the former, it involves prolonged periods of waiting for a moment that is bound to arrive, but with unpredictable timing. Like the latter, it depends on camera surveillance of strangers in public space, and on a great deal of contingency. In this case: who will jump, when, how, and how much of the act the camera operator will be able to enframe.

The temporal affordances of dv—its ability to record for long periods of
continuous time and the practicality of recording great quantities of time via cheap tapes or hard drive storage—helped realize Ruttmann’s imagined scenario eight decades later with a documentary called *The Bridge*. Its director, Eric Steel, aggressively put video surveillance to work capturing jumps at San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge, the world’s “most popular” suicide site. Recording on four DV cameras simultaneously during all daylight hours of 2004, the production captured close-up views of multiple suicides—footage of actual deaths that became the film’s backbone.

News of Steel’s project became public in January 2005 when bridge officials leaked the story to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and he was quickly embroiled in multiple controversies. The Golden Gate Bridge District condemned him for falsifying permit information (on which he claimed to be making a series of documentaries about American national monuments), word spread that he had not informed his interviewees about his footage of their loved ones’ suicides, and media coverage questioned whether Steel had made a “snuff film” at the magnificent landmark. Steel attempted to defend his controversial project against the snuff label by saying that his accusers misunderstood “the difference between filming death for the entertainment of others and filming it for the education of others.” Referencing a common ethical dichotomy of death documentary (does such footage provide only ghoulish thrills, or can it be informative and beneficial?), Steel places himself exclusively on the side of education—a position I will challenge in this chapter. The film’s release brought polarized reviews. Stephen Holden of the *New York Times*, for example, praised *The Bridge* for “juxtapos[ing] transcendent beauty and personal tragedy as starkly as any film I can recall,” while the *Guardian*’s Andrew Pulver wrote, “This could be the most morally loathsome film ever made.”

Though this documentary is hardly as unproblematic and straightforwardly profound as Steel professes, it would be a mistake to dismiss *The Bridge* as snuff. In doing so, we would ignore a film that epitomizes cinema’s struggle with the limits of representation, its efforts to overcome death’s resistance to visibility by seeking spectacular deaths, and the very real ways in which digital technology has changed the means—though not the stakes—of these endeavors. While its attempts to “educate” are less pronounced than Steel claims, its capacity to “entertain” is greater and more interesting than he can safely admit. Despite the film’s unsettling lack of self-awareness, its efforts to entertain signal an important break with an established dichotomy in documentary displays of violent death that parallels the entertain/educate split. Before *The Bridge*, there had been disreputable films allowing audiences to enjoy the taboo audio-visual pleasure of actual death and reputable films asking audiences to bear
witness to actual death as something terrible (and usually political). My discussions of *Faces of Death* (1978, John Allen Schwartz) and Internet shock sites (in the introduction and chapter 4, respectively) illustrate the reviled variety; the reputable type includes documentaries such as *Night and Fog* (1955, Alain Resnais) or *Hearts and Minds* (1974, Peter Davis). *The Bridge* uncomfortably explores the territory between these poles, perhaps acknowledging that in an increasingly crowded marketplace of documentary death, conventional portrayals no longer command the attention they once did.

That exploration is unquestionably marked by ethical transgression, especially by a failure to meet any conceivable documentary standard of informed consent in depicting either the dead or the living. But a willingness to examine the content of the film itself, in addition to the ethics of its production, underscores the inadvisability of separating ethics and aesthetics. In fact, *The Bridge*’s aesthetics as a finished film—how, audiovisually, it presents recorded deaths to an audience, beyond the mere fact of doing so—raise as many ethical doubts as Steel’s production methods.

*The Bridge* appears to epitomize the documentary quest to make actual death visible. It exposes (both optically and politically) a type of highly public death that, ironically, had remained mostly unseen (again, both optically and politically), for reasons I will explore later in this chapter. I argue, though, that the apparent visibility of these elaborately recorded deaths is illusory. In a move that renders it politically compromised and ethically dangerous, *The Bridge* covers over suicide’s “full detail” through its aesthetic strategies—capitalizing on the aesthetics of the Golden Gate Bridge itself, stylistic techniques associated with fiction film, and the inherent optics of suicide by falling as compared with other methods. Thus enhancing the grandeur of recorded suicide, *The Bridge* slowly trains audiences of mainstream documentary to overcome the impulse to view these jumps as purely horrific—an effort that peaks with its carefully chosen climax. The result is a documentary that returns, shortly after 9/11, to the traumatic sight of bodies falling fatally through space and presents them as a *sublime* spectacle: simultaneously magnificent and terrible. This combination of sublimity and suicide, generative as it may be of arresting images, breaks sharply with psychologists’ and sociologists’ guidelines for how image-makers can promote suicide prevention—allegedly an important goal of *The Bridge*.

It is this unusually clear and specific intersection of aesthetics and ethics in *The Bridge* that motivates my extended analysis of the film. Singular as this project seems because of its extreme subject matter and production methods, it is in other ways emblematic of the new ethical pitfalls that accompany our expanded capacity to record death with digital tools. Now that it is techno-
logically practical for a documentarian to, for example, record dozens of public suicides, new ethical quandaries emerge (as they will more and more often in the coming years of continued innovation in moving image technologies). How should one judge the curiosity of some viewers to witness these mediated deaths? Does their display demand a political function to be justified, and how directly should that display engage with politics? Through what aesthetic strategies should a filmmaker present such footage, and what are the ethical consequences of his aesthetic choices? In its implications for this final question, The Bridge proves most instructive, exposing the ethical danger of mixing evocative aesthetic approaches with tragic lived realities.

How to Record a Suicide in 10,000 Hours or Less: Logistics and Ethics in Shooting The Bridge

To record almost two dozen suicides for The Bridge, Steel devised a methodical production plan fully dependent on dv’s temporal affordances. He and his crew kept four dv cameras trained on the bridge’s pedestrian walkway every day from dawn to dusk during 2004. The cameras were split between two stations overlooking the structure from nearby coastland: one on the northeast side, one on the southeast side. Each station was continually staffed. An operator manually controlled the primary camera fitted with an extreme telephoto lens, which could zoom close enough to track individual bridge walkers. The operator decided whom to follow in these telephoto views, using, as Steel explains, “whatever instincts he or she possessed to try to determine who might climb over the rail.” The second camera at each station recorded a continuous, static wide shot of the bridge, only requiring the operator to change its dv tape every hour. The crew recorded footage of most of that year’s twenty-four suicides, striving for maximum visibility in their cinematography: they zoomed the cameras in as close as possible and tried to capture the act in its entirety, from the climb over the railing to the splash in the water below. In addition to this elaborate bridge surveillance, Steel shot around 120 hours of interviews with the jumpers’ friends and family (and with medical and psychiatric professionals speaking about suicide, though none of their interviews made it to The Bridge’s final cut). Rounded out by vivid shots of the Golden Gate Bridge from many angles and in many weather conditions, the production amassed more than 10,000 hours of footage. That gives the ninety-three-minute documentary a staggering 6,500:1 approximate shooting ratio—a ratio demonstrating, among other things, that The Bridge never could have been funded as a celluloid project.
During his production phase, Steel went to great lengths to conceal his surveillance of the bridge from the public, and even from his interviewees. As he explains, “My biggest fear was that word would get out about what we were doing and someone that wasn’t thinking clearly would see it as an opportunity to immortalize themselves on film.” In that scenario, Steel would have become the snuff filmmaker he is accused of being, in a strange way, by capturing actual deaths that were indeed staged for his camera (just not by him). The consequence of his covert operation, though, was that the production recorded jumpers without their knowledge, let alone informed consent—a factor that combines with their impending deaths to give them no agency in their cinematic representation. Steel is by no means the first to bear uninvited witness with a camera to violent deaths in public space and to have to consider how best to represent a victim who can no longer represent himself. But the fact that he set out to record such agonizing moments in the lives of others and his initial dishonesty with their grieving loved ones compromises his ethical position.

Moreover, making sure to avoid actively attracting jumpers does not ethically exempt The Bridge’s crew from intervening in the jumps that occurred on their own. Unsurprisingly, the intense “fly on the wall” technique that the extreme telephoto lenses enable has attracted a great deal of suspicion from viewers about low-level complicity in the recorded deaths. Crew members all had the bridge patrol’s emergency number on mobile phone speed dials and would reportedly call in whenever someone began to climb the railing. By setting rail climbing as the criterion for making a call, though, the production’s involvement would usually be too late, as many of the depicted jumpers express little hesitation once they make that climb. This element of intervention exists in tension with the project’s larger goal: to get the footage it set out to capture, The Bridge must train its cameras on some suicides that the crew cannot or does not prevent.

Here a return to Sobchack’s essay “Inscribing Ethical Space” (detailed in the introduction) is beneficial, as Steel’s mediated gaze straddles several of her categories for ethical or unethical recording of actual death. His is the “helpless gaze” in the sense that visible distance from the event prevents direct intervention; but Steel chooses his own vantage points and thus prevents himself from directly intervening (critics have suggested that if doing so were a real priority, one camera operator would have been walking the bridge). In a rare moment of intentional ethical vulnerability, Steel undercuts his own intervention strategy by including footage in the film of another image-maker on the brink of documenting death whose location on the bridge saves a life. An amateur
photographer snapping pictures on the walkway notices a woman climb the railing. After a brief moment photographing the event, he leans over and lifts her back to the walkway. Interviewed in the film, he describes his initial hesitation to intervene: “When I was behind the camera, it’s almost like it wasn’t real, because I was looking through the lens.” He reports being fixated on how great the material was but then realizing, “I had to actually get out of that mode of thinking and . . . do something to help her.” Unlike this man, Steel and his crew try to both record and act, presumably calling the bridge patrol with one hand and keeping the other on their tripod arm.

Thus, the gaze in The Bridge is also the “interventional gaze,” visibly evidenced by shots of bridge patrol officers that have been called in and by the shaky camerawork after some jumpers climb the rail, which presumably signifies a distracted operator calling the patrol. But a disturbing parallel observation is unavoidable: the polished camerawork of some other jumper shots (especially Gene Sprague’s, discussed later) implies that attention went to the footage rather than intervention. The latter scenario exemplifies Sobchack’s “professional gaze”—one that she isolates from the others as being not wholly acceptable. This gaze fails to meet Sobchack’s fundamental requirement for justifiable death documentation: the film “must indicate that watching and recording the event of death is not more important than preventing it.”

In this ethical borderland between interventional and professional gazes, The Bridge’s operators implicate themselves every time their tilt downward follows a falling body a little too smoothly.

To accommodate the uniquely digital mode of documenting death that Steel employs, I would propose an addition to Sobchack’s list: the expectant gaze. Characterized by the new, technologically enabled ability to simply run a camera and wait, the expectant gaze is accompanied by an ambivalent desire for death to occur. The documentarian looking in this way has primarily sought out an opportunity to record a life ending, not an opportunity to save one; it is death he waits for expectantly, not rescue. Gestures to the contrary (such as this crew’s calls to the bridge patrol) can be commended, but they must be reconciled with the project’s broader aim.

The expectant gaze relies on characteristically digital temporal extremes—on gazing with the camera running for a very long time—in order to capture death, but these extremes are largely erased when the footage is edited for distribution. Neither the feature film format that The Bridge adopts nor common Internet formats like the YouTube video can accommodate the protracted stretches of “dead time,” in which nothing of apparent interest occurs, that
documentarians must record while awaiting brief glimpses of death itself. Given the number of suicides in 2004, the length of each jumper’s fall, and the number of cameras The Bridge had running, the production could only have captured, at most, about six minutes of falling body footage amid its ten thousand hours. The fatal falls that are the film’s primary spectacle of death, for which the camera operators expectantly wait, thus represent about 0.001 percent or less of the project’s footage. As inhuman as such calculations can feel when the subject matter is recorded suicide, their implications for the human beings on the recording side of the camera are intense. While some expansive digital projects accumulate their footage through automated surveillance, recall that The Bridge dispatched operators to run cameras manually all day, every day for a year. This project’s expectant gaze, then, is a human, embodied gaze. Real people spent thousands of hours sitting with cameras employing it, training their lenses on the endless stream of individuals traversing the bridge—any of whom contingency might have transformed into a spectacle of death, but didn’t. These sights were instead demoted to the realm of the digital mundane—mostly to what is anachronistically called the cutting-room floor.

At 93 minutes in its finished form, The Bridge leaves approximately 599,907 minutes of digital video unseen by its audience, discarding these by-products of its expectant gaze. Documentary in the celluloid era, too, produced and abandoned significant amounts of footage, but the relatively high cost of film stock limited the practice and required greater selectivity about when to run the camera. The expectant gaze’s huge quantities of discarded time become practical only in the digital era, bringing these previously unfathomable shooting ratios—like The Bridge’s 6,500:1—into being in the service of catching brief, spectacular sights. There is a massive divide between these quick glimpses of falling bodies and the unseen hours of recorded time that undergird them. This divide contributes to my argument that despite failures to capture death “in full detail,” when death and digital technologies meet in an attempted recording, they reveal each other’s essential qualities. Here, it becomes clear that both have a tendency toward long durations (the long dying process that typifies most deaths in contemporary U.S. culture; the extended hours of footage digital filmmakers can afford to shoot) that get overshadowed by a more visible romance with instantaneity (the fetishized “moment of death,” especially in violent deaths; the exhilarating brevity of a YouTube video). In the combination of death and the digital, as in The Bridge, these shared traits rise to greatest prominence.

As 10,000 hours of footage were edited down to feature length, the offbeat
project took on a fairly conventional documentary shape, typified by its sixminute opening sequence. We begin with our entire visual field obscured by fog, which shifts quickly through a time-lapse effect, intermittently thinning to allow one of the Golden Gate Bridge’s towers to peek through. Its thick steel struts ascend skyward, complemented by the narrower vertical and diagonal lines of its support cables, and its red-orange hue gleams in the late afternoon sun. Cars fly down its road with the accelerated frame rate, and a boat’s wake streaks the water below. The contemplative score accentuates this beauty and mystery with shimmering gongs and cymbals and with strings holding sustained notes. As fog engulfs the bridge again, the time lapse ends, and a transition introduces a calmer day’s activity: birds fly over the bridge, kayaks and a cruise ship pass under it, and many pedestrians cross it. A sparse, plaintive piano part enters the score, inflecting the scene with sadness as the camera lingers on a middle-aged man looking over the edge. Shortly, he swings himself over the low railing, holds on for a few seconds, and lets go. The camera tilts down unsteadily as the operator struggles to anticipate the rate of his fall, his flailing body leaving and reentering the frame before it makes impact in a shower of frothy sea water. A kitesurfer floats through the shot, and we slip into an interview with him and his friend—supplemented visually with a montage of kitesurfing at the Golden Gate, and aurally with a half-lively, half-melancholy indie rock track. The kitesurfer, who saw the splash, explains how strange it was to realize that he was enjoying “a real celebration of life” through sport while “that person was at the lowest of the low of their life.”

This opening sequence introduces a structure and tone that are representative of the film as a whole. As we adjust to the daily life of this particular public space, we see its normality disrupted by a shocking event. After a brief moment to absorb it on our own, the event is folded into a narrative frame through interviews, which both highlight its unusual quality and also attempt to contextualize it within the range of “normal” human experience. We’re cued to feel sad that the event took place, but also to recognize what a rare and visually interesting spectacle the film is providing for us. If this deeply conventional documentary format feels uncomfortable in *The Bridge*, it is because the ethical and emotional volatility of the film’s death footage cries out for some kind of formal acknowledgment of the content’s singularity. This disjunction between ordinary form and explosive content is particularly loaded because of suicide’s status as a supremely taboo type of death. To elucidate what is at stake in the ethics and aesthetics of sublime digital suicides, I now turn to the rich history of this taboo and its representation.
3.2. The first jumper falls (*The Bridge*, 2006, Eric Steel, Koch Lorber).
“Prepared within the Silence of the Heart”:
The Public and Private in the History of Suicide

In discourse on suicide, Albert Camus’s book-length consideration of the topic, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, is often quoted for its opening line: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”11 *The Bridge*, as I will demonstrate, hesitates to take a side on Camus’s “fundamental question,” but it does plunge into territory acknowledged more cryptically on the following page of *Sisyphus*: the relation between suicide and aesthetics. Camus writes of suicide, “An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art.”12 He stops short of granting suicide artistic status but proposes an intriguing link between preparing one’s own death and an artist’s creative process. *The Bridge* expands on that link by documenting one strikingly artful suicide, and by strengthening that death’s artistic quality with its own aesthetic interventions. Historically, bold aesthetic interventions in the representation of suicide have been risky. Compared with the types of death considered in previous chapters, representations of suicide tonally depart from both the abrupt injustice of violent death and the routine sadness of natural death because the act itself has been so frequently and thoroughly reviled. Its reviled quality has confined suicide to the realm of the private on many levels: an individual suicide today is typically “prepared within the silence of the heart,” committed alone and in secret, and kept largely out of public discourse. But there has actually been a charged interplay between public and private throughout suicide’s history in Western society—an interplay that resonates with controversies around this film that makes doubly public the Golden Gate’s uncommonly public acts of suicide.

The most famous suicides of the classical era—when the act found its greatest, though not universal, acceptance—were practically social affairs. Socrates and Petronius, for example, are described as taking their lives amid entourages of friends, sometimes grieving, other times reading poetry or sharing a last meal with the man about to die.13 In another public element, citizens in parts of ancient Greece could request permission from the senate to kill themselves, receiving free hemlock if their reasons were deemed satisfactory.14 Citizens of later eras and cultures would rarely receive state permission to end their lives, but certain public elements would still characterize what became a much more private act. In the Middle Ages and early modern period, these included intensely public desecrations of suicide corpses, which could be “hung by the feet . . . dragged through the streets on a hurdle . . . burned . . . pierced cross-
ways with a stick . . . [or] buried under five feet of water in the sand.” Many of these practices emphasize their performance in public space, often as a deterrent to others in the community. Here the public display of suicide corpses is used, in an extreme and gruesome fashion, to discourage suicide; in a later section, I will argue that The Bridge enacts a parallel public display with quite different aesthetics and equally questionable results.

Most pertinent to issues of ethics and aesthetics in The Bridge are the public aspects of suicide in the more recent past that center on the role of media. The flourishing of the popular press just before the eighteenth century provided opportunities to disseminate details about individual suicides nationally, beyond the range of a mutilated body hanging in a town square. This technological innovation bolstered a wave of interest in suicide, which had become “a genuine fashion” for European aristocrats to debate in the salons (or even to commit). While the press in this period could have been used in the same spirit as corpse desecration, its role in publicizing suicide seems more sensational, even salacious, than discouraging. At the risk of piquing interest rather than repulsion, British newspapers printed not only suicide rates but also “articles on the most interesting, strangest, or most striking cases of suicide” and fueled the aristocratic fashion for suicide by reporting heavily on the most famous deaths.16

Extreme examples appear in Britain’s Illustrated Police News, which brought the most visually spectacular suicides to public attention in the 1860s and 1870s. One typical illustration, Suicide on a Railway, shows a woman’s severed head sitting apart from her body in a pool of blood. At the IPN’s most macabre, it painstakingly displays the awkward mechanics of self-crucifixion and self-beheading in multiple issues.17 These bizarre illustrations bring supposedly real suicides before the public eye but at the same time hyperbolically—almost comically—underscore suicide’s profile as a private act. The men in these images struggle alone in dark garrets with homemade execution equipment, trying to enact modes of death meant to be public spectacles, with attendant staff, as solitary suicides. Elsewhere, the IPN serves as a precursor for The Bridge’s displays of real suicides in its images of women jumping to their watery deaths from bridges.18 These engravings share many visual markers with The Bridge: a vantage point floating below the bridge and toward one bank, a falling body that dominates the frame’s center, and pedestrians who witness the jump without intervening. In the IPN, reporting “news” is a transparent excuse for printing lurid displays of death, but it is significant that these illustrations claim journalistic authority.19 Central to their appeal, it seems, is their grounding in actual events—regardless of the reader’s level of credulity. The Bridge shares both these qualities of the IPN’s suicide representations: an investment in the
graphic display of suicide (though with less overt morbidity) and a reliance on
the power conferred by these deaths’ real-world origins.

While images from the IPN or The Bridge can be reviled as distasteful, the de-
bate about whether and how suicide should be represented in public has higher
stakes than matters of taste—an assertion whose roots lie in the medicalization
of suicide. By the nineteenth century, a growing trend of attributing suicide to
insanity and melancholia became dominant, as the main current of discourse
on the act shifted from courts and churches into medical journals. While public
shaming practices like dragging suicide corpses through the street became in-
appropriate once those who committed suicide were rhetorically transformed
from sinners and criminals into victims of a psychological disorder. The twen-
tieth century continued this trend with intensified study of the problem in
psychology and sociology, disciplines that issued new prescriptions for reduc-
ing suicide through individual pharmacological treatments and broad societal
reforms, respectively. Despite its active scholarship, Georges Minois argues
that the era of medicalized suicide has also brought a decreased willingness
to acknowledge or examine individual suicides in public discourse. This new
 taboo on the visibility of individual suicides is doubly relevant to The Bridge, a
work that exposes individual suicides for detailed public examination and one
whose suicides are already unusually—even defiantly—public. Leaping from
an open-air structure full of tourists in broad daylight is an inherently public
act, and that aspect seems integral to the Golden Gate Bridge’s appeal as a sui-
cide destination. Its jumpers are willing to be, and perhaps even want to be,
highly visible and watched as they end their lives, in contrast to the intensely
private manner in which most suicides are conducted. The Bridge amplifies that
public quality immensely by screening individual suicides for a mass audience,
challenging Minois’s taboo.

One of the reasons for the recent public silence about individual suicides,
and for my claim that the aesthetics of suicide representation have higher
stakes than matters of taste, is a resurgent belief in “suicide contagion.” This
phenomenon occurs when people exposed to an individual suicide—usually
through the media—feel compelled to imitate that suicide. An 1845 issue of the
American Journal of Insanity (!) confidently asserts that “no other fact is better
established by science” and continues with a vivid warning against newspaper
reports describing individual suicides: “A single paragraph may suggest suicide
to twenty persons. Some particulars of the act, or expressions, seize the imagi-
nation, and the disposition to repeat it, in a moment of morbid excitement,
proves irresistible.” More than a century later, Joost A. M. Meerloo’s study
Suicide and Mass Suicide (1962) subscribes to the same belief, asserting plainly,
“Every suicide can start a chain of suicides.” Though scholars today are not in full agreement, suicide contagion has been largely confirmed as a real effect by suicide statistics in recent decades.

Dubbed the “Werther effect” by David Phillips, whose 1974 study elevated it out of the realm of myth, one early manifestation of suicide contagion allegedly emerged from the immense popularity of Goethe’s epistolary novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). Its title character commits suicide by gunshot when he can no longer endure his frustrated love for a married woman. Conceiving of the act as supremely romantic and beautiful, Werther nevertheless sees his plans go awry when he does not die immediately and must endure many hours of suffering before his painful death. Despite Goethe’s attempt with this brutal ending to temper his character’s romanticized vision of suicide, many readers still idolized and identified with Werther, publicly speaking and writing in defense of his choice to die. “Werther fever” saw Europeans dressing like the melancholy character and decorating household objects with scenes from his story. It was “a phenomenon that included not just enthusiasm for the novel, but also a desire to emulate its hero,” and in the novel’s 1775 reprinting Goethe added warnings to the reader not to follow Werther’s example. An early example of the alarming power of suicide’s representational romanticization, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* also gestures—through its sequential presentation of suicide as grand and then terrifying—at the sublimity that *The Bridge*’s representation of suicide would realize more fully.

The authors of the *Oxford Textbook of Suicidology and Suicide Prevention* (which devotes a chapter to suicide contagion) note, crucially, that there is “substantial evidence that non-fictional media reports on suicides exert a stronger imitative effect than fictional ones” and that the way suicide is represented can impact the rate of imitation greatly. The latter conclusion places the rare burden of life-and-death consequences onto the representational choices of professionals like filmmakers and journalists. Drawing on this research, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has published guidelines—which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Association of Suicidology have endorsed—that encourage media-makers to discuss suicide publicly, not suppress it, but to do so in a manner that will reduce the likelihood of imitation. Central to these recommendations is the well-supported theory that substantial attention to individual suicides can encourage imitation; thus, the guidelines discourage reporting on “a particular death . . . at length or in many stories.” They also caution against “inadvertently romanticizing suicide,” which another textbook, the *Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology*, echoes with a warning about “the praise, glorification, or otherwise rewarding
of the original stimulus suicide” in its depiction. The guidelines continue, “Research indicates that detailed descriptions or pictures of the location or site of a suicide encourage imitation.”

These guidelines seem unable to even conceive of suicide documentation on The Bridge’s scale, offering no specific clauses about displaying graphic footage of suicides, but it is not hard to extrapolate and assume that such a display would be discouraged. In trying to humanize and individuate its jumpers, The Bridge engages in precisely the style of representation proven to increase suicide, as it also does with the darkly beautiful shots of the Golden Gate as a suicide venue. Especially problematic is the relentless focus on one jumper, Gene Sprague, whose story structures the film and whose death, I will argue, is romanticized—perhaps not inadvertently.

Suicide’s Aesthetics: The Horrible, the Beautiful, and the Sublime

For all the metaphysical awe and terror we associate with the experience of dying, the unstaged appearance of death, as I have demonstrated in previous chapters, rarely suggests this sublime mixture of qualities—a reality helpful to acknowledge when seeking precedents for The Bridge’s aesthetic rendering of individual suicides. Further, most methods of committing suicide are so visually gruesome that they resist either the romantic or the sublime register, especially in their few documentary recordings. Michele Aaron observes that on the (also rare) occasion that fiction films depict a realized suicide attempt, they typically frame it as “painless or invisible but similarly anti-abject,” revealing a desire for softened representations of the act. But Aaron also illuminates the techniques of concealment necessary to create such representations: compositions that leave most of the body offscreen, well-timed cuts away from the act in progress, and so on.

To understand the severity of those techniques’ absence in documentary recordings of suicide, one need only watch a news crew’s footage of Pennsylvania state treasurer Budd Dwyer’s 1987 suicide at a press conference. Using the most favored method of suicide in the United States (by a wide margin), firearms, Dwyer puts a handgun in his mouth and shoots a round upward into his brain. The camera operator records in a medium shot as the gun fires and sprays the back wall with blood, zooms out as Dwyer’s body falls to a sitting position against a cabinet, then zooms in to a close-up on his lifeless face. At this point, an astounding volume of blood pours from Dwyer’s nose in torrents,
and a second stream runs down his face from the exit wound atop his head. This actual suicide is uncompromisingly displayed, and the effect is brutal.

There is no way to fit the aesthetic lens of sublimity over an act like Dwyer’s—a sense deepened by other footage of actual gunshot suicides. When Ricardo Cerna shot himself in the head inside a California police interrogation room with a concealed handgun in 2003, for example, a wall-mounted camera recorded his death. The ugly carnage of the gunshot wound, which immediately and unceremoniously pours blood down the front and side of Cerna’s body, is reinforced by the drab aesthetic details of the video’s mise-en-scène: a claustrophobically small room, bare institutional walls, and the distressed man’s grubby sneakers and gaudy T-shirt. Similar qualities pervade the death footage of Daniel V. Jones and Jodon F. Romero, each of whom shot himself in the head during separate confrontations with police that were broadcast on live television in 1998 and 2012, respectively. Filmed in extreme long shot from helicopters, these recordings emphasize abjection, as each man’s body flops limply to the ground after the bullets’ impact, and Jones’s gushes a stream of blood onto the pavement where he falls.

Suicide by gunshot, then, does not lend itself to a sublime documentary aesthetic because it appears too horrific and ugly when made visible by cameras. Other methods effect the body’s death with less visible violence and can lend themselves to a beautiful—though not sublime—documentary display, when these suicides unfold in the right medical and ideological context. I am referring here to another subset of death documentaries that depict assisted suicides, typically in the mode of political advocacy for the international right-to-die movement. Sometimes screening theatrically and sometimes airing on television, these include Death on Request (1994, Maarten Nederhorst), The Suicide Tourist (2007, John Zaritsky), How to Die in Oregon (2011, Peter Richardson), and Choosing to Die (2011, Charlie Russell). Implicitly seeking to redeem the documentary recording of assisted suicide from its infamous association with Dr. Jack Kevorkian, these films work to link assisted suicides with the contemporary model of the “good death” discussed in chapter 2. They frame terminal patients as courageously individualistic: opposing social norms against suicide, these patients take control over their deaths, making active and commendable choices to die without pain at a time they designate. Employing the right film aesthetics proves key to their framing of suicide as potentially beautiful—a framing essential to the mission of political advocacy. The climactic scenes of the suicide deaths themselves in these documentaries generally employ a gentle score, a warmly lit domestic setting, and frequent cutaways
from the dying patient to the emotional faces of her or his supportive family members and kindly doctors. Assisted suicide documentaries thus demonstrate that recorded suicide can be aligned with the aesthetic category of the beautiful. But the calm stasis of these deaths—akin to many from chapter 2’s nonsuicide deathbed documentaries—gives a sublime aesthetic little traction here. Emotionally moving but not dynamic, these represented suicides appear neither magnificent nor terrible.

*The Bridge* uses sublime aesthetics to subvert the suicide act’s customary brutality—aided by its choice to document a type of suicide (falling into water) that is visibly dynamic but that renders its external violence invisible. One of the most satisfyingly precise-yet-versatile labels in the study of aesthetics, the sublime emerges from a long lineage of theorizing. Edmund Burke defines it eloquently as “not pleasure but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror.” Building from Burke’s writing, Immanuel Kant refines the sublime to “a pleasure that only arises indirectly, being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful. . . . since the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also alternately repelled thereby, the delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect, i.e. merits the name of negative pleasure.” Unlike his tamer categories of aesthetic judgment, the sublime for Kant is a visceral experience—wrapped up not just in the mind’s operation but in the movements of the “vital forces.” There is a certain disturbing harmony in a “momentary check to the vital forces” in the observer that accompanies the sight of a permanent check to those forces for another human being, as in *The Bridge*.

Beyond Kant’s reference to the “vital forces,” other aspects of the sublime align well with death, suicide, and even the type of suicide in *The Bridge*. In “The Nuclear Sublime,” Frances Ferguson notes that both Burke and Kant conceive of the sublime as emerging from “great”—almost excessive—objects or experiences, quoting Kant’s assertion that it affixes to that which is “great beyond all measure.” The sublime “specifically elude[s] the apprehension we think ourselves to have of the objects of our perceptions,” as Ferguson puts it, also paraphrasing Burke’s attitude that “we love the beautiful as what submits to us, but we fear the sublime as what we must submit to.” The nuclear weapons Ferguson is writing about certainly fit this description—powerful to an extent that we cannot understand and that demands our submission—but so does death itself as a human experience. The sublime requires submission, but Ferguson emphasizes that it also authenticates our individuality because it is a subjective, aesthetic judgment rather than an inherent trait of objects. It
asserts selfhood in the face of powers greater than the self, as does suicide—an act that, however tragically, restores a measure of individual control over the forces of life and death. Perhaps that is why, referencing Friedrich Schiller, Ferguson mentions suicide as “the inevitable outcome of the logic of the sublime” and why Steel infuses the most individualized, tightly controlled suicide he records with the strongest overtones of sublimity. While the sublime can be a densely theoretical concept, I want to emphasize that I do not employ it in my analysis of recorded suicide for esoteric reasons but rather for grounded, ethical ones. As I will assert in my reading of The Bridge, the project’s documentary use of the sublime as an aesthetic strategy is inextricably linked to its ethical transgressions and the practical, embodied consequences these carry.

The Bridge is not the first text to combine sublimity and suicide, nor even sublimity and suicide in digital documentary work. Richard Drew’s photograph The Falling Man (2001) sparked immediate and intense controversy over its sublime depiction of a man in free fall, after he has jumped from the upper floors of the World Trade Center’s North Tower during the 9/11 attacks. This photograph is of special relevance to The Bridge because, as Annette Habel writes, “There is a reciprocal association between 9/11 and the depiction of human bodies falling.” It is hard, in other words, to look at bodies falling from a bridge without thinking about the bodies that fell from the towers.

As noted in the introduction, both moving and still images of the jumpers were widely created, briefly circulated by the mainstream press, quickly removed from that circulation, and revived on the numerous Internet sites where journalistic gatekeepers and cultural taboos hold little sway. On a day of invisible mass death hidden behind the crumbling walls of the towers, these images made visible dying individuals, and as such, they provoked both shameful fascination and the anguish of looking. Although many jumped (an estimated fifty to two hundred people) and many of the jumps were recorded, Drew’s image of one brief instant in an anonymous man’s long, ten-second fall stood out above all others because, in my view, of its improbable sublimity. It seemed impossible that an image-maker could find grace or awe alongside the terror of this rare and particularly tragic form of suicide—these deaths that were chosen by people who did not desire to die but who exercised their limited agency to select death by falling over death by fire or smoke. But The Falling Man exudes sublimity. The title figure is engulfed by the gleaming surfaces of the towers, which completely fill the photo’s background and remind the viewer that both they and the man stand on the brink of destruction—gone within an hour or a few more seconds, respectively. Small as the man is against this imposing background, he dominates the image through the striking pose.
in which he falls: headfirst, arms resting loosely at his sides, one knee bent, the other leg nearly straight. The sleek lines of the towers thus accentuate the perfect verticality of his descent, imbuing it with greater visual power rather than overwhelming it. His face is small and poorly illuminated, communicating nothing, which leaves the viewer to project only the appearance of his body—controlled but fluid, almost relaxed—onto his mental state. Amid the shot’s magnificence, though, its framing makes it hard to forget the terror of its context: the falling man appears in the top third of the image’s portrait layout. This composition reminds the viewer that he has a long way left to fall—fattally and gorily, onto concrete.

Hundreds of newspapers printed Drew’s photograph on September 12 and saw angry reactions from readers pour in. Many of the complaints purported to be about the falling man’s identifiability (though even after exhaustive searches he has never been identified with certainty), but I believe it was the symbolism and aesthetics of this documentary death image that more deeply disturbed the public. Drew defended his photograph partly by denying its status as documentary death at all: “I see this not as a person’s death, but as part of his life. There’s no blood. There’s no guts. It’s just a person falling.” Photographs of life do not generate letters to the editor the way photographs of death do, though. As Barbie Zelizer puts it, Drew’s is an “about to die” image, quite distinct from images of living even if their subjects are not yet dead. It is clear from the tenor of the controversy that viewers saw death in The Falling Man—a picture of awe and elegance in horrific circumstances that alternately comforted and disturbed viewers as a vision of 9/11 deaths. Naomi Halperin, a photo editor who fought to get the picture printed, takes comfort in what it did not show, what it screened out about that day: “I saw grace, I saw a stillness. Even though I know that he was falling, I saw a quietness in that as opposed to a loud, horrible, burning death.” Journalist Tom Junod reads it as more existentially frightening: “At a time when the country was desperate for images that were communal and redemptive, Drew gave it a man left to the mercy not of God but of gravity, and dying utterly alone.” Sublimity’s awe and horror were both present for viewers of The Falling Man, just in different proportions.

Perhaps the photo’s most unsettling aspect is the way its aesthetics connote agency. To wrench a graceful death out of the terror of this context implied an exertion of effort and purposefulness, implied that the man falling prepared this suicide “within the silence of the heart,” at least in the few minutes or seconds during which he decided to jump. He must have chosen to dive, struggled to make his body fall in this exquisite way. The intentionality of his pose refuses to let the viewer disavow the agency of the jumpers—as heartbreakingly limited
as that agency was—by imagining that they slipped out or were blown out. It forces the viewer to acknowledge this man’s choice to jump and perhaps prompts her to think, unthinkably, of what choice she herself would make in his situation. Little wonder, then, that *The Falling Man* provoked such a harsh rejection. What most of those who saw the image never discovered, though, was the illusory nature of the man’s graceful, purposeful dive—lacking, after all, the excess of intentionality it seemed to possess. In comparison with the other eleven frames Drew snapped of the man, this particular photograph’s frozen, enduring sublimity comes to reflect only an accidental split-second pose of his body as it tumbled haphazardly through the air. As Junod writes, seeing these unpublished frames reveals that “he fell like everyone else . . . which is to say that he fell desperately, inelegantly.”

Capitalizing on the instantaneity of photography, Drew’s image fabricated a sublime documentary death from a profilmic event that would be difficult to place in this aesthetic category. Steel’s moving image medium offered no opportunities for that manner of deception. To display, in its full duration, the sublime death that ends his film, he would need an (unwitting) artistic collaborator: another falling man who really did pursue a graceful suicide with undeniable intentionality.

**Calibrating Sublimity in *The Bridge***

As the previous sections demonstrate, when the generally private act of suicide has entered public space (either physically or through representation), the tone tends to be resoundingly negative. Works that dilute suicide’s horror by exploring its potentially positive aspects—grace, nobility, a release from suffering—often meet intense controversy, as did Goethe’s *Sorrows* and Drew’s *Falling Man*. With the sight of falling bodies inextricably linked to the 9/11 jumpers, the idea of centering a reputable post-9/11 documentary that was aiming for the festival circuit on that visual spectacle risked a particularly strong controversy. This association was not an accident of poor timing for *The Bridge* but rather one of the several origin stories Steel tells about the film. On 9/11, Steel watched the jumpers from his New York office window, recalling in an interview, “I could actually see that from where I sit now. Obviously, that’s one of those things that you just can’t erase from your mind. . . . Someone jumping off the bridge was making a choice to escape an emotional inferno, perhaps not equivalent, but somehow related perhaps to what I had seen on 9/11.” Steel’s response to the horrifying sight that he “can’t erase from [his] mind” is to seek out, record, and make widely visible more jumpers, following the thin
metaphorical connection of the “inferno.” One could surmise that Steel is returning obsessively to an experience of trauma. But it is questionable whether the product—perhaps too direct in its return—is therapeutic for a post-9/11 audience. As one unsettled reviewer wrote, “After 9/11, viewers can be forgiven for never wanting to see another soul take a fatal plummet.”47 As I will detail, in Steel’s compulsion to repeat this personal and national trauma, he, by chance, encounters one suicide that can repeat the sublime aesthetics of The Falling Man, too.

Connotations of sublimity waft through many reviews of the film, which refer to it as “a beautiful, wrenching, horrifying work of cinema” and “an emotional and aesthetic whirlpool of horror, fascination, beauty”; another review observes, “these images of death are grotesquely, irresistibly fascinating; their poetic, vaguely unreal gracefulness contrasts poignantly with the despair they imply.”48 Deadly jumps from a high place, as we witness them in The Bridge, have the potential to evoke both of Kant’s two categories of the sublime: the mathematical and the dynamic.49 Experiences of the mathematical sublime overwhelm us with their magnitude—like beholding the expanse of a starry night sky, in nature, or the broad bulk of the pyramids, among human-made objects. Magnitude is a particularly affecting element of jumps off the Golden Gate Bridge. The bodies we see fall traverse a vast, frightening distance—second only to the jumps from the World Trade Center—that truly can influence the “vital forces” when contemplated, as Kant describes. Dynamically sublime sights are those that awe us with their overpowering force rather than their overwhelming magnitude—like a lightning storm or a volcanic eruption. These suicides may affect viewers as dynamically sublime through the crushing force of gravity that drives the bodies downward as they contort, and the powerful impacts with the water that send up breathtaking bursts of white against the bluish-gray bay (a spectacle of impact that documentation of the 9/11 jumps did not, mercifully, display).

The dynamic quality of this method of death is morbidly well suited to cinematic representation, which, as previously discussed, often struggles to visualize the internal bodily process that defines death. Cinema is an art distinguished by its capacity to convey motion, and the jumpers achieve death by motion of a profoundly visible and dramatic nature. Movement itself is the lethal force, in a much more perceptible way than a bullet from a gun. Kant emphasizes that to experience the dynamic sublime, one cannot oneself be in physical danger from the event witnessed but must be “a safe distance” away. Watching a volcano erupt from within the lava’s range, for instance, produces not “delightful” horror but just the regular kind. Again, cinema—still a century
away from invention at the time of Kant’s writing—proves to be an appropriate medium for the dynamic sublime. It offers close-up audiovisual access to the powerful force while maintaining a “safe distance” for the viewer, who is separated by both time and space from the sublime profilmic event.

Documentary death is undoubtedly adept at “repel[ling]” the mind with its horror. In *The Bridge*, it becomes even more taboo when its potential sublimity is acknowledged—when a documentarian demonstrates that the mind can also be “attracted by the object.” Death documentaries that either attract or repel, but not both, are the most common variety of their uncommon breed. *The Bridge*’s tenuous balance of the two puts it in relatively unexplored documentary terrain. But, as Kant insists, the sublime is an aesthetic judgment, not an intrinsic quality; it is a particularly difficult judgment for documentary audiences to feel comfortable making about such taboo material. David E. Nye asserts, in agreement with Kant, that “one person’s sublime may be another’s abomination”—an idea that certainly applies to how reviewers and the public have judged *The Bridge.* Steel seems to understand that difficulty, and he relies on three major tools to make audiences receptive to the sublimity of suicide: the sublimity of the Golden Gate Bridge itself, anesthetization to the shock of seeing death, and stylistic techniques that aim to soften suicide’s horror.

In the film’s opening sequence, described earlier, the magnificence of the Golden Gate Bridge seems to contrast to the horror of people jumping from its span. Introduced as a majestic site, the Golden Gate immerses visitors in a dramatic intersection of the best that nature and architecture have to offer. It provides recreation, transportation, and an unrivaled vantage point for Bay Area sightseeing. Only the ominous score and the fog prepare the viewer for the death footage, which, in this first instance—preceded by shots of happy tourists and followed by shots of happy kitesurfers—feels like an upsetting and anomalous disruption of normality in public space. Amid the Golden Gate’s atmosphere of communal pleasure—one associated with U.S. national identity and the promise of the American West—an instance of such acute, individuated despair is difficult to process. For pedestrians on the bridge, who remain largely oblivious to the jumpers throughout the film, it seems difficult to even detect amid the surrounding sensory overload. Thus, the deaths at this site that should feel extremely visible and public—occurring, as they do, in a completely exposed outdoor area full of people and in the light of day—still need the documentary camera to wrench them out of invisibility.

This factor in suicide at the Golden Gate recalls a painting Steel cites as an inspiration for *The Bridge*: Pieter Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Bruegel’s landscape is packed with visual information, centered on a brilliant
blue expanse of water, bounded by cliffs and a port city, and dotted with islands and ornate ships. The foreground is densely populated by a farmer plowing, a shepherd and his flock, and a fisherman. The sun blazes hot in the background, hinting at the title character’s doom, but none of the men in the foreground see him sinking into the blue water . . . nor may the viewer at first, since his figure is so small and de-emphasized, in a dark corner of the scene. Like the Golden Gate’s visitors, the men in this painting are too engrossed in the activity and beauty of the day to notice a small pocket of tragedy in their landscape. And through his composition, Bruegel implicates us, the viewers, alongside them. We, too, may have missed the sinking body were it not for the title’s prompt to look for it.

With a similar effect, the massive Golden Gate Bridge engulfs those who visit it and juts in all directions, its architectural lines constantly soliciting them to look left, right, up, down, and outward to the bay and skyline. Additionally, every view is filled with motion: cars, bicycles, and people traverse the span, which sways in the wind, while below the water churns and boats pass by. The unrelenting clamor of cars makes the site’s sonic environment just as overwhelming. Like death itself, the totality of this place seems beyond the capacity of representation. Significantly, Steel’s zoomed-in digital cameras accomplish the opposite: with the overwhelming magnitude and dynamism of the Golden Gate rendered elsewhere in the film, these shots filter it out and isolate individual anguish. They make visible the deaths that are otherwise lost among the stimuli of teeming environments, highlighting what neither Bruegel’s laborers nor the Golden Gate’s tourists seem to notice.

The first time we see one of these suicide close-ups, it feels like a violation of the site’s spirit, evocatively described in Nye’s *American Technological Sublime*: “The *San Francisco Examiner* editorialized that the bridge is ‘a gateway to the imagination,’ noting that ‘in its artful poise, slender there above the shimmering channel, it is more a state of the spirit than a fabricated road connection. It beckons us to dream and dare. First seen as an impossible dream, it became a moral regenerator in the 1930s for a nation devastated by depression’ . . . ‘can do proof’ that the nation’s ‘inventive and productive genius’ would prevail. It was, and is, an outward and visible sign of an ideal America.”

Nye does not mention the estimated sixteen hundred suicides that have occurred at the bridge since its opening in 1937. Their terrible counterpoint to its stunning beauty is a lens through which this optimistic description reads very differently. The “moral regenerator in the 1930s for a nation devastated by depression” appears in *The Bridge* as a reminder of a different kind of depression still devastating that nation. Its beckoning to “dream and dare” connotes its
3.4. *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, c. 1555 (oil on canvas), Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525–69) / Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium / Bridgeman Images.
darker lure for those bold enough to kill themselves in such a frightening way. As a sign of a can-do, ideal America whose “inventive and productive genius” could solve any problem, the bridge looks newly frail. This perspective on the structure harkens back to Émile Durkheim’s assertion that most suicides stem from society’s failure to integrate individuals into a system fully, to give their lives collective meaning.\textsuperscript{52} The unseemly suicide pilgrimages to this landmark, this symbol of national pride, that Steel records illuminate its social failure. Documenting the loss of human potential that goes largely unprevented at the site, \textit{The Bridge}’s digital cameras provide the too-visible proof of the gap between America’s ideal and its reality.

In the film, suicide adds an element of terror to the bridge’s grandeur, but the bridge in turn lends an element of grandeur to the terror of suicide, pulling both into the realm of sublimity. The Golden Gate provides a majestic final view for those about to die, imbuing their deaths with grace, at least as they appear to witnesses: their trajectories trace the vertical lines of the bridge downward, and the mutilation of their bodies on impact is screened out by a splash. This screening out is crucial, as the splash provides another barrier to death’s cinematic visibility—much like the strategic framing and editing choices Aaron identifies in fiction film’s romanticized suicides—that, in this case, suits \textit{The Bridge}’s aesthetic ambitions perfectly. Seeing the moment of fatal impact in “full detail” or the corpses would pull sublimity back into horror—especially this site’s corpses, which are much the worse for wear after their fall. Those contemplating suicide at the bridge often imagine an instant, clean death, but the reality is (as usual) a more painful and durational process. The fall’s impact splinters bones that then shred internal organs, and those who survive it drown, either in the water or in their own blood as it fills their lungs. After death, the Coast Guard recovers only some of the bodies, and those not located quickly can have their eyes and cheek flesh eaten off by crabs. \textit{The Bridge}, while making actual suicide deaths visible in some ways, leaves the embodied violence of this method of suicide in the realm of invisibility—keeping it literally beneath the surface, subsumed to the aesthetics of the sublime. Suicide in this documentary, then, misleadingly appears “painless . . . anti-abject,” as Aaron observes that it does in most commercial fiction films.\textsuperscript{53}

All these graphic details are described in “Jumpers,” a \textit{New Yorker} exposé on Golden Gate suicides that \textit{The Bridge} credits as its inspiration, but they are notably absent from or downplayed in the film, communicated to the audience only partially by one young man who survived the drop and describes his injuries.\textsuperscript{54} Where Goethe emphasized the physical suffering and gruesomeness of Werther’s suicide, Steel seems unwilling to acknowledge the violence of the act.
he records. He refrains from showing all but one oblique glimpse of a body being retrieved from the water. For a documentary so aggressively pursuing views of public suicide from multiple vantage points, this omission reveals a great deal about its aesthetic priorities. The Golden Gate thus promises to lend grace and a public venue to an act that is usually messy and private, and *The Bridge* cooperates by suppressing any unsettling remnants that resurface.

But just as the awe of the Golden Gate distracts pedestrians from seeing suicidal despair, the initial shock and horror of watching a jumper’s descent can mask its appealing aesthetics. To train his audience to look past horror and see something magnificent intermingled with it, Steel attempts a gradual anesthetization through repetition of the fatal jumps. Susan Sontag first wrote about gruesome photographs’ potentially anesthetizing effect in *On Photography* (1977) (an idea she revisits in *Regarding the Pain of Others* [2003]): “To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize.”

Though Sontag is writing about still images, this particular aspect of her photography theory translates well to moving images. During a dense, temporally bound collection of such sights in a single documentary, her numbing process can happen quickly. *The Bridge* needs it to, so that a spectacle that seemed horrific in the film’s opening moments will feel sublime by its closing scene. Key to this audience transformation is repeated viewing of the difficult sight, which *The Bridge*’s audience potentially experiences on two levels: the many jumps they see while watching the film, but also similar images they have seen beforehand (chiefly the 9/11 jumpers). Repeated viewing of a difficult sight is not just a means of anesthetization but also a strategy for comprehending the sublime. For example, Nye gives an account of activist Margaret Fuller’s attempts to absorb the sight of Niagara Falls in 1843. Prepared for the experience by drawings and a panorama, Fuller stayed at the falls for a week to view them many times from multiple angles. “Before coming away,” she wrote, “I think I really saw the full wonder of the scene.” *The Bridge* uses a similar repetition approach to acclimate viewers to the sight of real death and allow its potential sublimity to well up, displaying one very specific variety many times and from multiple angles and distances. Five jumps are shown with zoomed-in closeness, and another four appear in extreme wide shots of the whole bridge.

These wide shots are a notable component of *The Bridge*’s anesthetization process because they not only add more jumps to the film but also prompt
the viewer to look for them actively. The first of these “postcard” views, as Steel calls them, frames the entire bridge in a wide, static shot that remains on-screen for a long forty-five seconds. Tucked away somewhere in that time and space is the tiniest dark speck falling from the bridge, followed by a small splash. Knowing the film’s topic of people jumping off the bridge, the viewer will likely expect that sight in any sustained view of the structure, but Steel pushes her to want to see suicide by setting up a challenge of finding it in the shot. One of these postcard shots even begins with two pedestrians who are being interviewed about their encounter with a jumper on the bridge saying, “we didn’t see him jump”—an editing choice that admonishes the viewer not to make the same mistake and to look carefully for the splash. Bruegel’s Landscape with the Fall of Icarus shares this macabre Where’s Waldo? quality, its title prompting the viewer to hunt through the landscape for Icarus’s tiny, sinking shape. Through The Bridge’s many iterations of suicide’s display, the event we thought of in the opening sequence as a rare spectacle—intruding upon the tranquillity of the bridge’s daily life—is thus slowly infused with a sense of typicality. The jumps even accumulate a limited set of conventions through their repeated presentation: people pause to look down before jumping, leap feet first, and flail their arms and legs on the way down.

In planning these repetitions, Steel mimics the structure of genres such as the musical or pornography, both of which are adept at dispensing spectacle. The Bridge’s prime spectacle, recorded suicide, becomes the backbone of the film through its editing scheme: all other elements are arranged to complement the jumper shots, the way narrative is arranged around song-and-dance numbers in musicals or around sex acts in pornography. And like those genres’ prime moments of spectacle, the jumper shots in The Bridge are meted out at regular intervals, so that the viewer never waits long to see another. Given that the project was always so firmly rooted in the aesthetics of visible death, this structure comes as no surprise. Asked if he thought about leaving out the jumper footage, Steel said he had not, “because his whole concept was ‘to be able to show what it looks like from the outside.’” 57

As always in documentary, what something “looks like from the outside” is filtered through the filmmakers’ choices about how to look at it. Structures and stylistic techniques that we associate with mainstream, fiction film (like the spectacle-emphasizing editing scheme just mentioned) play a major role in how The Bridge aestheticizes its documentary footage of suicide. To be clear, the startling thing about this comparison is not that a documentary is employing techniques we associate with Hollywood fiction—a familiar phenomenon—but rather that such techniques are being grafted onto this documentary footage, to
3.5. A wide “postcard” shot of the bridge, with jumper
(The Bridge, 2006, Eric Steel, Koch Lorber).
death footage, to amplify its suspense and affect. As Andrea Fitzpatrick writes, in reference to 9/11’s falling-body images, “Aesthetic values in representations of human suffering [do not] preclude an ethical engagement with them. The goal is not to impose prohibitions on certain aesthetic or formal gestures but to identify what they do to embodied subjects in this unique genre.”

An influence in *The Bridge* from mainstream fiction film is best illuminated by contrasting it to another documentary on suicide at the Golden Gate. Far more experimental than *The Bridge*, *Suicide Box* is a thirteen-minute short created by Natalie Jeremijenko and shown as part of a larger installation at the Whitney Biennial in 1996. Like *The Bridge*, it records jumpers at the Golden Gate but with an unstaffed camera triggered by their vertical motion—not by an elaborate, fully staffed, four-camera setup. The results are accompanied by footage of daily life at the site and on-screen text that describes the project with the detached style of a scientific report.

*Suicide Box* displays footage of fatal jumps, just as *The Bridge* does and ten years before it, but did not seem to generate much controversy. Granted, *Suicide Box* had a limited circulation, confined to high art circles, as opposed to *The Bridge*’s theatrical release and wide availability through DVD and streaming distribution. But another factor causing the disparity in controversy, I argue, is that *Suicide Box*’s footage employs none of mainstream, commercial cinema’s stylistic tools for spectacular representation, while *The Bridge* employs many. *Suicide Box* eschews a polished look throughout, diminishing the sensuous beauty of the Golden Gate with its cheap video aesthetic and handheld cinematography, but the jumper shots are particularly ragged. Their brief, mostly black-and-white, static views in extreme long shot make the falling bodies appear just as black specks against the sky. The shots are cut together roughly, one after another, with only the indistinct noise of electronic equipment running on the sound track. The resulting scenes are basically degraded versions (blurry, no color, limited sound) of what we would see if standing where the camera recorded these jumps.

*Suicide Box* provides another opportunity to expand Sobchack’s list of gazes, with its ethics-centered taxonomy of the moving image camera’s ways of recording actual death. Jeremijenko’s footage employs what I would term the “automated gaze,” originating from an unstaffed camera that records everything with a homogeneous, unresponsive aesthetic style. While *Suicide Box*, with its vertical-motion-triggered recording apparatus, presents an eccentric case, the automated gaze at death has become increasingly common in the video and digital era through the explosion of closed-circuit television (cctv) surveillance of public space. Death footage recorded by these kinds of cameras litters
the Internet shock sites I analyze in chapter 4, conveying at once the charged energy of startling sights recorded by chance and also the frustrating optics of conventional surveillance aesthetics. Deaths captured by the automated gaze tend to appear in static, low-resolution, extreme long shots that communicate extremely little of death’s “full detail.” The fatal action here typically unfolds far from the camera, sometimes even slipping out of the frame that will not move to follow it, and is generally recorded without audio. While it might seem that the automated gaze cannot be ethically judged because of its absent human intentionality, I would emphasize the importance of assessing its ethics before and after the recording is made. Who set up the camera, why, and under what conditions? Who preserved and distributed its death footage, in what form, and for what purpose? Sobchack focuses on the ethics of recording death, but considering how fraught and contested the distribution of such footage has been throughout the history of image technologies, this phase of documentary death’s life cycle deserves greater ethical consideration—a task I engage with further in chapter 4.

What makes The Bridge so singular and shocking, then, is its implementation of extreme, embodied surveillance that does not rely on an automated gaze. Where Suicide Box and other automated recordings display death less clearly than it would appear if witnessed in person, The Bridge’s cinematographers intentionally use technology to enhance human vision, adding greater visibility, drama, and suspense to how the viewer would perceive its deaths if she were there to see them with the naked eye. These operators zoom much closer, offering clear, full-color shots that “see” from an otherwise inaccessible vantage point, revealing details like facial expressions and nervous fidgeting. The frame is mobile rather than static, directed to follow the jumpers and give us the best possible view of each descent, striving to keep the falling bodies centered and in focus. Music provides audiences with cues for how to feel about the jumps, combining a yearning, minor-key score with melancholy pop interludes. Steel also uses foley effects, adding a postproduction splash sound to accompany each impact on the water. The mise-en-scène does its part, too, as the striking atmosphere of the Golden Gate is used to set the mood for the jumper footage—especially when the editor cuts in shots with ethereal fog, a lightning bolt, or a hopeful rainbow to generate specific emotions.

The accumulation of these techniques is crucial to the final revelation of sublimity that ends the film. Building to a scene of brazen escalation, Steel saves his most spectacular footage until the audience is fully primed to encounter a sublime suicide—primed by the accrued sublimity of the Golden Gate and by the adjustment to watching recorded deaths throughout the film. Then
he can enfold magnificence and horror into the suicidal act rather than dividing them between intention and act, as Goethe does. This particular jumper, Gene Sprague, is shown over and over throughout the documentary, pacing the bridge. Appearing at regular intervals, he walks along clad entirely in black with his long, dark hair blown about by the wind.

Because no other jumper’s story spans the entire length of the film, one starts to wonder while watching *The Bridge* for the first time what makes Gene’s so remarkable. Like most of the jumpers, Gene had a history of mental instability, had talked about committing suicide in the past, and struggled with finances and relationships. Other jumpers in the film are more memorable for the unique content of their stories: one had a friend who fears that she contributed to his death by giving him her prescription medication and cutting short a social visit when he said he was feeling suicidal; another was just twenty-one years old and had direct conversations with his sympathetic father about whether he should kill himself and how; another, Kevin Hines, lived to narrate his journey of despair to and off the bridge, which ends with hope through his survival and newfound direction working in suicide prevention. If the film prioritized suicide prevention and “education” over “entertainment,” as Steel claims, Hines’s story would have been the optimal focal point (despite the fact that his jump was not recorded and he appears only in talking-head interviews). Instead, *The Bridge* highlights Gene’s story, building suspense by teasing it out over ninety-three minutes and ending on his jump. That choice turns him into a protagonist—adopting another convention of commercial fiction—in a film that, ethically, feels like it should not have a protagonist. The way Steel structures his footage and mediates Gene’s image implies a disturbing judgment: that Gene’s jump is more significant than the others, that his life and death are worthy of greater attention. In short, he is the star of *The Bridge* where the others are supporting players.

When we finally see his suicide, the reason it has been withheld and hyped for so long becomes clear. Unlike the other four furtive jumps seen in close-up, Gene’s is uniquely graceful. He sits on the railing with his back to the drop and then smoothly hoists himself into a standing position atop it. For a second, he balances there—his tall frame, clad in black leather, complementing the vertical red struts of the cables. Maintaining his straight-backed stance, he tips his weight resolutely toward the bay and gently falls backward with a high diver’s grace. Spreading his arms straight out in the first instant of his descent, Gene does not flail wildly like the other jumpers in free fall; during the drop, he holds his chosen pose remarkably well as his body twists slightly in the wind and lands with a towering splash. Gene’s mediated suicide is, in a
word, spectacular. It realizes the eerie fantasy that remains illusory in The Falling Man, capturing an artful death that can withstand an unblinking, moving image display—that need not be excerpted in a split-second photograph to suggest sublimity. Like “the falling man,” Gene is the lone body falling sublimely enough to be fetishized by a documentary image-maker amid a host of more aesthetically unremarkable suicides.

For the compassionate viewer, there is always an element of horror in seeing real people die on camera. While none of the deaths I have studied for this project have been easy to watch, Gene Sprague’s is the only one whose aesthetics convey—disturbingly—an undeniable majesty. Significantly, it is also the most skillfully documented. Unlike the other jumps, every visible instant of Gene’s, from his climb onto the railing through his splashdown, is enframed. The camera operators (including Steel, who personally filmed Gene for ninety-three minutes) capture the sight from both the north and south recording stations and provide clear views of it from two different angles. With perfect Hollywood style, shots from these two angles are sutured together with a match cut and even maintain the 180-degree line, conveniently visible in the form of the bridge itself. Thus, a serendipitous confluence of aesthetics wins Gene the role of protagonist in The Bridge: his jump provides the greatest spectacle, and the crew records it with the most skill.

In its cinematic presentation, Gene’s jump is not only shocking and spectacular but also specifically sublime. A brief comparison with mainstream, commercial cinema underscores the sequence’s sublime aesthetics and their association with that branch of filmmaking. Hitchcock’s Vertigo (1958) might seem the most natural match with The Bridge: it features a suicidal character who journeys to the Golden Gate Bridge, appears entranced by the site, and leaps into the bay. Further, she seems to have been infected by a hereditary strand of suicide contagion (as we are told that her great-grandmother killed herself and may be possessing her), and, just like The Bridge’s subjects, she is unknowingly being watched by a vaguely creepy voyeur. The missing ingredient in Vertigo, though, is the spectacle of freefall that is so important to The Bridge. Madeleine makes her leap from the shore underneath the structure, at Fort Point, and falls only about ten feet into the water, out of the camera’s view (a strange venue choice explained by a later plot twist).

There are precedents, though, in both documentary and fiction film history for the conspicuous stylization of bodies falling through space. In the former, beyond The Falling Man in photography, one should recall Leni Riefenstahl’s hypnotic high-dive sequence in Olympia (1938) and Werner Herzog’s awestruck shots of ski jumpers in The Great Ecstasy of the Sculptor Steiner (1975). While the
threat of a fatal landing pervades Herzog's film, these documentaries generally celebrate the controlled descent of skilled bodies in athletic competitions—a far cry from The Bridge’s more controversial display of lethal falls that end unhappy lives. Mainstream, fiction film has more frequently found aesthetic beauty in violent falls, with the seamless realism of new digital effects generating a glut of such scenes in recent decades. Examples include Cliffhanger (1993, Renny Harlin); City of Angels (1998, Brad Silberling); Vanilla Sky (2001, Cameron Crowe), Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (2001, Peter Jackson); King Kong (2005, Peter Jackson); Watchmen (2009, Zack Snyder); Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (2009, David Yates); Dredd (2012, Peter Travis); and Les Misérables (2012, Tom Hooper), to name a sample. These scenes of dramatic descent exemplify what Kristen Whissel identifies as digital cinema’s special effects–enabled obsession with verticality, manifesting now in digital documentary without the aid of effects through The Bridge.⁶⁰

The final scene of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000, Ang Lee) resonates strongly with The Bridge, as it depicts suicide via bridge jump and stylistically softens the horror of that event. Like Steel, Lee uses an ornate bridge for his location, shrouded by fog and immersed in an awe-inspiring natural environment. A young Chinese warrior woman, devastated by the emotional destruction she has wreaked upon fellow warriors, has been drawn to this mountaintop bridge by a legend that those who jump from it will float away and have their deepest wishes come true. But there is sadness, not hope, in her eyes as she shares a few parting words with her lover and then springs over the railing. The actress’s movements combine with practical and digital special effects to portray this suicidal leap as supremely elegant. Her body strikes an open pose, her hair and clothes flow in the wind, and the camera swoops around her to provide multiple views of her slow-motion descent, eventually losing sight of her in the thick fog. An evocative score plays under the event, and we are even guided in how to react by an on-screen witness: her lover, who appears saddened but also deeply moved.

Many of these techniques for amplifying spectacle reappear in The Bridge’s finale of documentary death. Gene himself begins this appropriation, as the lone suicidal individual at the Golden Gate paying attention to aesthetics. With a touch of flair, he arrives at the bridge in a kind of costume—his outfit an expressionistic signifier of his dark thoughts—and deftly choreographs and performs his graceful jump. With its back-to-the-drop positioning, slow and dramatic tilt, and calm maintenance of the body’s straight, vertical pose, Gene’s jump feels unquestionably cinematic in its conception and execution. Exuding aesthetic intentionality, his jump’s fluid and expressive motion primes it to
register well in a moving image medium, regardless of the fact that Gene did not know he was being recorded. His choreographed jump so closely aligns with the aesthetic qualities of commercial fiction’s dramatically-falling-body trope, described earlier, that this trope may have directly shaped it. In other words, I suspect that Gene Sprague was thinking about some film scenes when he planned how, exactly, to fall from that bridge. Like Mark in *Silverlake Life* and so many others steeped in U.S. death culture, Gene may have “known” what death looks like primarily from fiction film. Implicitly shaped by cinema, Gene’s death—enfolded into a work of cinema without his knowledge or consent—now plays its own role in shaping the medium’s depiction of death and in shaping death culture at large.

Gene’s consideration of appearances aligns not only with cinematic representation but also with the intensely public quality of this suicide venue, where an estimated 76 percent of jumps are witnessed by someone on the bridge. Prevention advocates comment that this location may be chosen by people who want to be stopped, to be talked back over the railing. But a more uncomfortable possibility those advocates might not want to consider is that, as mentioned earlier, it may also be chosen by people who want to be seen killing themselves. Unbeknownst to Gene or the other jumpers, *The Bridge* would amplify that public quality by recording and displaying their deaths for a theatrical film audience. Whether Gene planned his exit for his potential witnesses at the Golden Gate or for his own satisfaction—a parting gesture of success and control in a life that seemed to lack those qualities—he gave his audience a true performance.

The audiovisual mediation of Gene’s already-striking suicide in *The Bridge* strives to elicit a sublime interpretation. To amplify awe and give his respectable target audience extra assistance in getting past the horror of recorded suicide, Steel relies heavily on his audio track. The last spoken words in the film, played over Gene’s image just before he stands up on the railing, are from his older friend Caroline, who has been a source of calm and well-articulated wisdom throughout her interviews. Speculating on why Gene chose the bridge, she says, “Maybe he just wanted to fly one time.” No longer dark and brooding, the score now lets its string instruments rise to higher and higher notes, bolstering this connotation of flight, before fading out to silence with Gene’s fall. Familiar elements from fiction fare like *Crouching Tiger* recur here: the euphemistic framing of a deadly fall as “flight,” environmental elements that conceal the violence of landing (fog or a splash), the inspirationally swelling music, the survivor who is both saddened and moved. With them, *The Bridge* strives to create an environment in which viewers can finally embrace the “negative
pleasure” of sublime suicide—a sight whose educational value remains stubbornly abstract in what Eric Steel claims is an educational, suicide prevention documentary.

This closing sequence demonstrates that despite exploiting powerful digital technology, The Bridge ultimately owes much of its shape to chance—a factor that has always been integral to the documentary capture of life as it unfolds, to the magic of this cinematic form. Chance survives even in a production like Steel’s, with its punishing shooting schedule that endeavors to master contingency through the unblinking gazes of its digital cameras. The film is able to build to such a sublime release only because its crew happened to witness this one immaculate jump and to record it with more skill and better camera coverage than others. Even with two people training four cameras on the bridge all day every day for a year, the odds that they would capture a performance like Gene’s seem slim. With documentary death’s mystique somewhat dulled by the many contributions of video and dv to its archive, Gene’s jump restores a feeling of “I can’t believe they caught that on camera” reminiscent of Robert Capa’s The Falling Soldier and Eddie Adams’s Saigon Execution.

A “False Romantic Promise”:
The Bridge’s Reception and Gene’s Posthumous Fame

A documentary that records and displays the suicides of real people certainly breaks taboos and raises ethical issues, as its vocal detractors have noted. But as I have argued earlier, The Bridge is an even more volatile work than its surface-level public controversy acknowledged. By uncovering its sublime aesthetics beneath the mere fact of its displays of suicide, I seek a more sophisticated understanding of its ethics and potential effect on audiences—and, by extension, of broader questions about aesthetics and ethics in an era of burgeoning death documentary.

When documentarians enhance the potential for aesthetic pleasure in their death footage, they risk consignment to the ethically condemned “death porn” category, alongside films like Faces of Death and Internet shock sites that stream gruesome actuality footage (analyzed in the introduction and chapter 4, respectively). Aware of the ethical quagmire he creates by showing lush close-ups of actual suicide, Steel is eager to disassociate his deployment of this footage from any unseemly fascination with the sight of death. He asserts that The Bridge will disappoint viewers who crave graphic death scenes: “I don’t think it’s used or incorporated in a way that will satisfy someone’s voyeuristic urge to see it. . . . If it were exploitation, I could have put together a clip-reel of people
jumping off the bridge and sold it on the Internet.” Here, Steel references death porn and fights to avoid that label for his film.

As noted previously, linking documentary death to activist or humanitarian causes can often secure the type of respectability Steel seeks. To show death as sublime without having his documentary dismissed as lurid trash, Steel’s strongest option is to forge such a link between *The Bridge* and suicide prevention. He could have aligned his project easily with a ready-made source of “redeeming social importance”: several local organizations had been lobbying the Bridge District for years to erect a suicide barrier at the site. In fact, Bay Area filmmaker Jenni Olson was completing her own documentary, *The Joy of Life*, advocating for this suicide barrier during *The Bridge*’s production phase. As with *Suicide Box*, this film is more experimental than *The Bridge*: its first twenty-seven minutes are contemplative shots of San Francisco locations with voice-over narration about a butch lesbian’s sexual escapades, then its concluding section on suicide is a very legible advocacy piece. There, Olson accompanies static 16mm shots of the bridge (without anyone jumping off it) with narration about its history of suicide: the number of jumpers, the duration of their falls, the fatality rate, the bridge’s design history, and the decision to build such a short guardrail.

Having firmly established a problem, Olson’s script then details a solution: a suicide barrier. The narrator deflects the claim that people prevented from jumping would just kill themselves elsewhere (citing a sociological study that demonstrates otherwise), scolds the Bridge District for continually resisting a barrier project, and describes how other former suicide landmarks have been fitted with effective barriers. Olson has said about the structure of this activist segment, “I wanted to attack it without being gruesome or exploitive, which a lot of the material about the topic is.” Beyond designing its content as activist, Olson proactively put her film to work: she adapted its script into an op-ed for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, collaborated with the Psychiatric Foundation of Northern California in its pro-barrier efforts, and sent DVDs of *The Joy of Life* to the Bridge District’s board of directors.

While I found no evidence that Steel himself took the kinds of advocacy measures Olson did, *The Bridge* was certainly put to political use by established barrier advocates after its release. And despite its tremendous and perhaps unforgivable ethical lapses, *The Bridge* did produce unprecedented material results in this cause, becoming one of the primary forces that pressured local government into approving a suicide barrier proposal for a safety net beneath the walkway (though, at the time of this writing, construction on the project still has not begun). Olson herself acknowledges that *The Bridge* “brought an
enormous amount of attention to this seemingly intractable issue. It was an absolute tipping point I think. The fact that he was making the film became like this PR nightmare for the Bridge District. Olson’s film exposed the facts, but Steel’s got the headlines with its falling bodies. The Bridge bluntly made visible the long-ignored suicides at the city’s signature landmark in living color and queasy close-up, essentially embarrassing voters and the local government into taking action.

To the press, Steel has often emphasized The Bridge’s major impact in the barrier campaign, but, significantly, the film itself scrupulously avoids any barrier advocacy. In fact, confined strictly to the world of the jumpers and their loved ones, it makes no mention of a potential suicide barrier at all. This absence coexists uncomfortably with the film’s purported ambition of suicide prevention and Steel’s claim that The Bridge shows death to educate, not to entertain. A related absence of interviews with experts—in psychology, sociology, or suicide prevention—puts an undue burden on grieving loved ones to educate the audience about suicide and severely limits the type of knowledge that can be presented. The effect of these absences is palpable in records of the film’s reception, such as comments from Steel’s most eager pupils on The Bridge’s official message board. Many there express sympathy for the jumpers and a wish that something could be done to solve this problem of suicide at the bridge. But in my examination of all 960 entries on the board, I found that only 23 made any mention of a suicide barrier—and a number of these wrote about a hypothetical barrier idea, without awareness of the actual barrier campaign.

In one of her wisest insights about the “education” provided by images of suffering and death, Sontag argues, “To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell, how to moderate hell’s flames. . . . moral indignation, like compassion, cannot dictate a course of action.” The Bridge does not dictate a course of action, either for Golden Gate Bridge district officials or for viewers anywhere who might need guidance in how to prevent a suicide. Suicide prevention—regardless of whether one believes it should be the documentary’s goal—thus feels like an afterthought for The Bridge, a defense to trot out against ethical criticism more than a demonstrably pursued educational effort.

Despite the controversy it generated, The Bridge also achieved a surprising measure of respectability, playing at major film festivals. Assigning the documentary a label Steel worked hard to avoid, but modifying it to fit that new target audience, one viewer wrote about it as “Faces of Death for the Starbucks crowd.” In arguing that suicide prevention and barrier advocacy were an afterthought for the makers of The Bridge, my intention is not simply to dimin-
ish their benevolence but to emphasize that the film itself has different ambitions—ambitions that perhaps are worth the price of these attacks for Steel and for its fans. By analyzing its aesthetics and not merely its fraught ethics, I have taken seriously Steel’s ambition to show what death “looks like from the outside,” examining how he turns suicide into a sublime spectacle that even “the Starbucks crowd” can watch without shame.

The end results of those aesthetic ambitions—Gene’s ascent to star status in the documentary, and the amplification of sublimity in his death—have indeed had a powerful effect on the film’s reception. Their impact on the viewing public resonates with comments from an interviewee in The Bridge, who speaks about the “false romantic promise” of a Golden Gate Bridge suicide and laments about her friend Daniel, “I think it drew him with this idea of being famous.” Daniel did not become famous, but Gene Sprague has become more famous than one would expect for a man posthumously portrayed in a limited-release documentary. He stands as something of a modern-day Werther figure, on a much smaller scale than Goethe’s protagonist. In addition to the large percentage of comments devoted to Gene on the film’s Internet message boards, he is also elaborately memorialized on two different websites that receive intimate RIP messages and virtual flowers from strangers who have only seen him in The Bridge. One of these sites reports that a third site used to exist, but its owner closed it down “because of the over zealous people who saw the film and glorified his suicide.” A number of singers and bands have recorded songs based on Gene’s appearance in the film and posted them online, including one titled “Maybe He Just Wanted to Fly One Time.” And Gene’s image has been duplicated many times as clips from The Bridge are posted to YouTube and tagged with his name.

To forge a celebrity out of suicide footage, and to infuse the act itself with the awe of the Golden Gate Bridge, is to dramatically disregard the aforementioned media guidelines for depicting suicide and the research about suicide contagion. Through the language of those guidelines, Gene’s suicide in The Bridge is “a particular death [that] is reported on at length” and is “romanticized” through Steel’s presentation of it—effectively so, as evidenced by viewer responses. Eighteenth-century commenter J. J. Engel worried that readers of The Sorrows of Young Werther would “take the poetic beauty for moral beauty,” a fear that applies equally well to this twenty-first-century film. The threat posed by The Bridge exposes a categorical difference between documentary displays of war death and of death by suicide, and it also exposes the error of applying the former’s justifications to the latter. Most displays of war death implicitly rely on the axiom that broadcasting the visible horrors of war will promote peace—
that actually seeing the human bodies that war rips apart will galvanize a naive public into active opposition. While seeing displays of war death is believed to diminish war, seeing certain displays of suicide is proven to _multiply_ suicide through the effects of suicide contagion. In this context, when Eric Steel is asked why he could not tackle his topic without the death footage, his reply takes on a disturbing new resonance: “Once there’s an actual film of someone jumping off the bridge you can’t just forget it; the image won’t disappear.”

While aiming to enlighten an apathetic public that pays little attention to suicide, Steel’s campaign to implant “the image [that] won’t disappear” also reaches suicidal people. For some of them in viewing _The Bridge_, the aforementioned 1845 warning from the _American Journal of Insanity_ seems to apply: “Some particulars of the act, or expressions, seize the imagination.” Tangible traces of that impact appear on the film’s official message board, where a large number of commenters evocatively describe being “mesmerized,” “entranced,” or “haunted” by the sight of the jumpers, often repeating the phrase “I can’t get it out of my mind.” Though some there credit _The Bridge_ with convincing them _not_ to kill themselves, at least ten describe its spellbinding effect as fueling suicides or suicide attempts. One man writes, “I hope I can find the courage to do what those tormented souls did—take control of their own destiny. Barring the use of another method, perhaps someday I too shall join their ranks.” Others mourn the loss of loved ones to the Golden Gate, whose recent viewing habits they describe: “After my friend spent hours obsessively watching this movie, she made the leap. Draw your own conclusions.” Another woman writes, “My daughter jumped from the Bridge on August 1, 2008. She had watched the movie over and over for months. . . . I believe it became in a sense, hypnotic to her.” Such stories migrated from Internet message boards to the national news when reporters revealed that eighteen-year-old Kyle Gamboa—whose 2013 jump from the Golden Gate Bridge became a high-profile case—had repeatedly viewed _The Bridge_’s trailer before his suicide.

To pioneer the documentary display of sublime suicide, as Eric Steel has done, is also to take great ethical risks with viewers’ emotions, and even their lives. But the specific risks and rewards of a project like _The Bridge_ are complex and wholly entangled with aesthetics. To extract them requires a willingness to critically analyze documentary death footage rather than dismiss it as obscene at the outset—even if analysis still elicits a negative verdict in the end. Such dismissals carried low stakes in André Bazin’s era, when documenting death on film was a seldom-realized fantasy. But as the digital age matures and the public gains access to real death “on demand”—in theaters, on DVD, streaming, downloadable—media scholars must fully address these multiplying texts.
Conclusion: The Diver in Reverse

In his richly articulated condemnation of documenting death, described in my introduction, Bazin at one point moves from generalities to a hypothetical example of the act he so detests: “I imagine the supreme cinematic perversion would be the projection of an execution backward like those comic newsreels in which the diver jumps up from the water back onto his diving board.” For all the stylistic manipulations Steel uses in *The Bridge*—and for all of its politically disengaged, ethically suspect, dangerously romantic aspects—one cinematic tool he selectively rejects is a manipulation of time, like the manipulation Bazin describes. Time’s flow is not decelerated, frozen, repeated, or reversed at any point during the jump footage, despite the use of such techniques elsewhere in the film. There is no mystical slowing down of the moment of death, nor will any of these “divers” be returned “up from the water” to their points of departure. Temporally, then, death unfolds routinely and irreversibly in *The Bridge*, in contrast to its depiction in other falling-body film scenes mentioned earlier, all of which use slow motion. Unlike their descents, often filtered through composite effects and CGI in addition to the slow motion, the falling bodies of *The Bridge* defy the much-discussed immateriality and ephemerality of digital technologies. True, they are transferred to the screen algorithmically instead of indexically. But for viewers—in a less theoretical, more experiential sense—these individuals still plummet with the heavy weight of their embodiment, pitched downward with unattenuated speed. As an audience, we sense their materiality. We believe in it, in a practical, painful way.

And yet, theorists of the digital also write that its images are infinitely malleable, never fixed as a final product that will remain untouched. *The Bridge* has not remained untouched, and its remixing in a few YouTube videos yields one particularly interesting example that defies Bazin’s notion of “the supreme cinematic perversion”: a music video from metal band Seether cut together with footage from *The Bridge*. The original Seether video includes a narrative about a young man contemplating suicide from a rooftop. Halfway through, he makes the leap—tipping backward just like Gene, but in slow motion. By the end, though, the band’s belted-out determination to “rise above this” has the power to reverse his descent, propelling him back up from the ground to the rooftop unscathed. The YouTube remix, as comments from its author make clear, is an earnest (if perhaps distasteful) attempt at a suicide prevention video. In it, the roof jumper’s shots are replaced by footage from *The Bridge*, including some of the death footage. Gene appears most prominently. He makes his jump, and by the end is restored to his starting point by rolling the video clip
backward—like Bazin’s newsreel diver coming “up from the water back onto his diving board.”

This amateur editor’s optimistic revision of The Bridge’s irreversible suicides, however naive, speaks to something deeply rooted at the intersection between death and documentary, to a quality that unites celluloid film and digital video: cinema’s illusory promise to preserve what it records, to hold onto what would otherwise be lost and return it to us anew with each viewing. In the face of actual death, this promise is achingly seductive—even when the only moment that gets preserved is a person’s last, as in The Bridge. Its footage of suicide at the Golden Gate, like all documentary images of death, is rife with cognitive dissonance. A rare memento mori in a death-denying age, it is also a simultaneous pledge that some spectral form of immortality is possible—that we can hoist the dead back over the railing through a video clip played in reverse.
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