Reality as a TV-video image: Reality of the TV-video image
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Abstract
The paper presents an exploration of the relationship between a real-life experience of an event - discussing the observations of those present at the time of the attack on the New York Twin Towers Trade Centre on September 11th, 2001, many of which were described in terms of TV-video images - and the images of an event presented by the electronic medium - examining common conceptions of the reality of an electronically recorded image. The paper proffers key questions to be considered by researchers and teachers when using actuality video.

Reality as a TV-video image

The day of September 11, 2001, will live long in all of our memories through the forceful television images of passenger planes impacting on the Twin Towers Trade Centre in New York and ash-grey wreckage strewn street; the traumatized victims and terrified weeping witnesses; the exhausted rescue workers and distraught relatives and friends. These images remain in our minds and reappear in our nightmares. They are so powerful and so horrific compared to mundane existence that they create an unconscious need to avoid description by words; indeed words are, at a time of cataclysmic occurrence and unprecedented emotional turmoil, almost irrelevant.

It is, however, in the nature of humans to share their experience and evolution depends in no small degree on person to person communication skills. If words fail in such a situation, pictures do not. In comprehending an event of such magnitude, individuals, including media personnel themselves, resorted to the visual metaphors of television and film in an effort to adequately present their experience to others. Using metaphors, says Corsini (1995) in the Foreword to Kopp’s “Metaphor Therapy”, can lead to a “shattering moment of understanding … what is known as insight”. Public comments were heard that likened the immediate aftermath of the attacks to scenes from shared common cultural and entertainment experiences - scenes from the fictional movie-illusions of “The Towering Inferno”, “Dante’s Peak”, and “Independence Day” (Divaphill, 2001). The terrifyingly vivid flames, smoke and crumbling buildings were spoken of as initially being mistaken for cinematographic “special effects”, or a promotional “teaser” trawling for pre-release popular viewing of a film. Referring to a created visual narrative containing pictorial references is easily understood by most. A metaphor is a pragmatic use of language that Lakoff (as cited by Cruse, 2000, p.205) likens to “a means whereby even more abstract and intangible areas of experience can be conceptualized in terms of the familiar and concrete”.

Like the earliest of hominids’ cave-art records it appears we have reverted to pictures to adequately relate life-experiences. The use of visual metaphor in explaining the incomprehendable has long been recognised in clinical family and child therapy (Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997), but now commonplace language developed over the entire history of humankind is being superceded by technologically constructed visual metaphors. Reality is increasingly described through shared visual cognizance of the pictures seen through the TV-video image as presented through the mediums of commercial television and film and expressed through corporate and domestic video.

Reality of the TV-video image

“Actual” events are the factual basis of edited documentary and news programmes as well as being recorded for research or education, or for personal, archival or informational purposes. Thus electronic video technology is seen as a means of capturing and preserving events in-verbatim. This paper explores the belief that “reality” can be unquestionably captured in video recordings and can then be unambiguously replicated.

Humans have a history of
…experiencing a reality which seems real, but is not,[which] is as old as dreaming and humans have, been using technology to induce it … light waves emitted from a television screen … [that] can evoke in the mind scenes that are not present in reality. (Tiffin and Rajasingham, 1995, p.127)

The socio-cultural environment of western industrial societies has long encouraged this belief encapsulated in the saying of “seeing is believing”, and in the faith implicit in the personal declaration, “I saw it with my own eyes”, albeit through a mediated channel such as television.
The veracity of all visual recording instruments is, of physical necessity, qualified by technical and human factors. Reality in a video image still requires translation through the video medium’s language, including manipulation of the time factor, shot composition, colour and so on. It also needs to be produced acknowledging the limitations of the technology and presented within the constraints of programme presentation.

Although the recording may be of actual events, what might be labelled as “cognitive realism” (Bignell, 1997, p.166), that is it provides “knowledge about the concrete facts of the real world”, its excision from real life multidimensional continuity of occurrences into a limited videosegment of that actuality and promotion of it as a surrogate for the whole of the experience is open to question. That certain audiovisual elements within a particular space-time continuum are delimited and presented as a totality risks “distortion” of the essential “truth” of a situation. The commonsense realisation that video recording is limited to the time of operation, that events have occurred before and after the recording, as well as synchronously in parallel is not always consciously understood by operators or viewers and is rarely explicitly acknowledged.

Because television “pictures are in a sense self-evidently true” say Turner and Cunningham (2000, p.90) “we recognise what we see as ‘real’ “, however a recorded image should not be “confused with the material object it represents” states Karl (1994, p.198) explaining that “a visual image is a manifesterment of a camera or an artist’s brush or a computer, and each of these “tools” is in the hand of a human being with his or her own filtering mechanism”. The spatial dimensions of actuality offered by videos are tempered by the physical limitations of the equipment, such as the lens angle being unable to capture the full 360° solid angle context of an event therefore affecting interpretation of the cause of certain actions. When simulating a human viewpoint, particularly an unusual one, the ordinary video camera cannot “mimic” the sensory interactions of a person actually observing such an event during which infinitesimal photokinetic eye movements, stimulated by sound, respond to conscious action against a background of other sensory inputs.

The physical limitations of video recording produce a “metonymic fragmentation of cultures (e.g., focus on single events)” (Martinez 1992, p.147). Although in the early years of video use, visual anthropologists Collier and Collier idealised that “if you had enough film or video tape and could keep the camera going for the full duration of a process through hours, days, and weeks ... you would have essentially unaltered reality” (1986, p.69), it is not just technicalities that induce parameters on the imagistic representation of reality provided by video. Cooper, Lavery and Rinvulucr (1991, p.5) in “Video” suggested that the video camera is not just a “passive recording device” but is “a maker of reality”. There are indeed “real” events created that would not have taken place if they were not being recorded. The potential for distorting the recording of an event, whether occurring naturally or due to the recording process, troubled Legrady (1995, p.187) who in his study of images and language explains that video consists of “minute, indeterminately arranged components ... of light intensities”, the variation of which is controlled by the equipment and the operator. Video could be said to provide a modified sense of reality as: The medium not only reflects but also refracts what is given; what is returned is ourselves, transformed and processed. To the degree that the technology reflects ourselves back recognisably, it provides us with a self-image, a sense of self. (Rokeby, 1995, p.133)

In an article about experience and representation in film, but which is just as relevant to video, Devereaux states that it “allows the viewer a degree of autonomy different from that of a reader’s” as it is “constructed in the moment of filming” unlike a piece of writing that “takes place after the experience” (1995, p.72). Even so, Devereaux makes a useful distinction between “looking”, where the viewer and the viewed remain ontologically separated, and “seeing”, where the viewer is aware of the contextual surroundings of recording, viewing, and viewers (1995, 70-1).

As video and computer technology continues to develop in sophistication it “evolves towards apparent transparency” (Rokeby 1995, p.144) but even at its best “what is visible is only a small and often insignificant aspect of that reality” (Hüppauf 1995, p.117). Although the images may be “altered, recomposed, and transformed in many ways ... [they] still retain the sharpness of form and detail, the whiff of actuality, that allows us to continue in our happy pleasures of mistaking it for reality” (Devereaux, 1995, p.330). However it is “when the technology itself grows powerful enough to make the illusions increasingly realistic ... the necessity for continuing to question reality grows even more acute” (Rheingold, 1993, p.299).
Viewing itself is also constrained by the functional processes of video equipment; the visual focus is maybe too broad, perhaps vague; auditory inputs may be confusing or inherently instrument modified. As well, the human attention span, if not production needs, tends to reduce the extent of the visual material captured and therefore lessen the spectrum of viewer responses. This is particularly so when there is less than full 360° virtual reality (Sweetow, 1998, p.82) and the viewer is deprived of a holistic appreciation and has to contend with the “here and now” as background to their video viewing rather than what was “there and then”. These and other delimiting effects imposed on video data by technicalities are amplified and rendered complex by viewers’ individual understandings and perceptual confirmation of what constitutes actuality or reality. Even when presented as full 360° virtual reality that allows viewers to “travel great distances through space and time without stepping out of the building” (Emmett, 1998, p.34) “virtual” reality is still distinguished from “physical” reality - one is not the other (Hayles, 1999).

A phenomenographic study (Penn-Edwards, 1998), which surveyed current research papers and interviewed teachers and researchers using video recordings, has shown that the relationship of a video recorded image to the actual event was seen by different users as being inferior, equal or even superior. Many users considered that only part of the actual event was captured by the video so that it provided only a sample or a segment of the event:

- With video you often have an imperfect picture of what went on, where necessarily you are looking at one aspect (Interview 14)
- There is only the opportunity for one of a universe of options to be realised [when videorecording] (Interview 5)
- It certainly doesn't capture the whole classroom, it still only captures a perspective (Interview 12)
- It was really good and very helpful in disclosing and revealing … it's just that sneaky feeling that some students may well have been doing other things (Interview 11)

A singular advantage in producing a video is that it can give a “voice” to “those who are otherwise silenced in their schools and communities” (Tyner, 1998, p.185). Many teachers and researchers regard video recordings as a valuable aid to capturing a useful version of reality and a viable alternative to being an observer at the “live” event. Generally however, video is seen as being an all encompassing complete record of the event:

- I love the use of video because it's real ..... it's a frozen moment ... in time (Interview 3)
- Now with technology being the way it is we have this piece of equipment called the multi-gen which records everything (Interview 6).
- We had something concrete that we could work from that gave us something to look at (Interview 19)
- It became a record of what teachers did in classrooms (Interview 11).

Video recording is also seen as being “sufficiently near to the actual experience” to be used by the viewers in relating to the images shown and appears as a readily acceptable alternative in gaining a pre-familiarity by way of a video presenting to students a virtual reality field. It is acceptable as being able to replace live observations or personal experience:

- [I could] have a look at what's really going on (Interview 1)
- [They] have been people who have said ‘if I can see it, I can believe it’ (Interview 3)
- I felt like I really got a sense of everything that was happening (Interview 9).

Faith in the absoluteness of the reality in the videoed situation is strongly evidenced when students view video recorded case studies commenting that “on a videotape you can actually see it happen” (Pape and McIntyre 1993, p.10). However, several users also said that video gave more than the actual experience because it presented an optimum viewpoint or revealed concealed “inner selves” allowing viewers to look “beneath the surface” of the actual event:

- You can see more [in the video] than you can in the live coding situation (Interview 4)
- I would never have picked that up about him had it not been through the video (Interview 19)
- There is always something that emerges [from the video] that was unexpected (Interview 8).

Video recordings may also, says one interviewee, give “insight” into the subjects who were recorded: “[The video is] a means of analysing what's going on in terms of relationships among the kids ... we are trying to capture the insights that they have” (Interview 7). Users also see video recordings allowing the reasoning, ideas, conceptual understandings, subtle nuances and relationships of those recorded to be exposed:

- I want to be able to try and capture where ideas come from (Interview 9)
He needed the video tape to get those subtle nuances between actors playing up to directors (Interview 17).
I actually think the video tape is a really good method of being able to abstract such things ... like the mood of the class and the tension of the class ... you get a sense of that when you watch through a video (Interview 19).

It may be that the essence of the situation resides in “belief” formed from a general knowledge of how things are in the external world. It goes beyond the recognition that video reflects “our own lives” and implies an innate recognition and acceptance of something as being absolutely “real”. Such faith is bolstered by the conviction that the individual constantly adapts to conditions imposed from without, as with any living organism, so that whilst the transmitted image is not itself the “reality” it can be accepted as representing an assumed reality. As in metaphor therapy, we can be said to have moved from the “logical meaning associated with the content of communication to the metaphoric meaning associated with the metaphoric image” (Kopp, 1995, p.4).

It is paradoxical that total, absolute, and temporal reality as perceived by the five senses aided by deductive powers is not able to be captured and kept in a TV-video image, yet an acceptable, limited, and substitutive reality, experienced only by sight and hearing, can be inferred by allusion to the everyday experience of TV-video images. This experience is dependent on our inherited cultural belief system and the rationale of an educated self in contemporary technically oriented world.

It follows that in order to retain intellectual integrity and maximize the legitimacy of the purposeful use of video recordings, it is wise to consider such key questions as:

1. Who will use the video recording and for what purpose?
2. How important is the veracity of video recording in this particular context?
3. What are the parameters of veracity acceptable to the makers and users?
4. In what ways is the veracity of this video recording affected by perceptual processes?
5. To what extent did the recording techniques affect the veracity of the video recording?
6. To what extent did the recording techniques take cognizance of viewer perceptual processes?
7. How can the effects of viewer perceptual processes and recording techniques on the veracity of the video recording be minimised?
8. To what extent can veracity be assured?

References


