VIDEOGRAPHY

Videography

Video Media as Art and Culture

SEAN CUBITT

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To Alison Ripley

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Acknowledgements

The time it takes to view a tape and the time it takes to read aren't the same. The first video art I ever saw was 07734, upside down on a pocket calculator LCD display. I'm still thinking about it.

My first book (Cubitt 1991) was an attempt to clarify in my own mind the terms under which it might be possible to think about video. In the current work, I have extended this by trying to find out how to write about it. Videography is writing about video: this book is an expedition through some different schools of analysis in pursuit of a way or ways of making useful, apposite, adequate commentaries on video practice, and thereby to contribute to video culture. The term 'commentary' may suggest a deconstructive turn to this endeavour, and some might see in that a gesture of defeat, an Alexandrian palimpsest of comments upon commentaries. The contrary has been my intention: I have wanted to make a work of writing which can serve a useful purpose in helping and encouraging the growth of interest in new media practices. Then, perhaps, both this writing and the video work to which it refers can work in consort to contribute to the critique of what is described here as an emergent hegemony. This critique I understand as the heart of the cultural democracy which this writing is intended to serve, the purpose of both practices being to disrupt the dominant through diversity, and so to provide the circumstances for further diversification. Perhaps because of this critical role, the works referred to will often be difficult for the reader to find. I have appended a list of the major distributors of video media in the English-speaking world so that, if these titles are unavailable, you can find others.

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SEAN CUBITT

Introduction: Video Media

Why video *media*? Video, after all, is a familiar enough medium in its own right. We know, or feel we know, what it is: a recording medium using magnetic tape to distribute synchronised sound and image. But then, the word 'video' is also used to distinguish between types of camera: film cameras using the more traditional photo-chemical strip, and video cameras using electronics, either tubes or now, more frequently, silicon chips, to convert light and sound into electrical impulses. Filmmakers, long used to video viewfinders, now often turn to video editing, transferring filmed images to magnetic recording media in post-production. Or, even more recently, they are turning to laser disc transfers, allowing greater speed in finding, comparing and selecting alternative versions of a shot. Magnetic and laser media share a base in digital technology. Film is an analogue medium, providing with every frame an imitation of whatever was before the lens when the aperture was opened. But digital media, instead of storing representations (little photographs), store their visual and audio information as blips of electricity, little 'on' and 'off' signals, little ones and zeros. You can look at a piece of film against the light and see what is recorded, but you can't with magnetic tape, or magnetic or laser discs.

This storage by means of bits of information takes us a step away from film and towards another family of media whose core is the computer. Unlike film, video media do not rely exclusively on the camera. Admittedly, some films are made by working directly on the image and sound areas of the film strip: Norman MacLaren's animation work with the National Film Board of Canada is only the best known representative of the tradition. But even then, there's a guaranteed physical presence of the film in the process of its own making. By this I mean that the film strip has always actually been where the work of marking/exposing it took place; there has been some physical contact between it and some kind of

outside reality (the light through the lens, the hands of the artisan). Video isn't like that.

I often find myself using the analogy of the guitar and the piano. Film is like the guitar: you select your note with your left hand as well as sounding it with your right. But the piano player doesn't select the note in the way a guitarist or violinist does, or sound it the same way: her hands never actually touch the string that vibrates. It's not that there is any less skill involved, or that equally wonderful music cannot be made on each instrument; it is simply that they are different, albeit related. Video is like the piano: it is at that slightly greater distance from the physical world when you actually try to 'play' it. The analogy won't bear much extension: the point is that video doesn't need a camera as it has many sources from which it can derive its visual and auditory effects: from MIDI interfaces, touchscreens, light-pencils, alphanumeric keyboards, libraries of text, sound and image stored as tape, disc, laser and magnetic media, computer programmes and, of course, from all the traditional media. Video media are plural, then, in terms of their origination, the places in which they are produced.

When we talk about watching a video, a similar confusion arises. Are we talking about a feature film, or a timeshifted TV programme, a leisure tape on gardening or fitness, a corporate or community information tape, a video artwork, a surveillance tape from a closed-circuit TV system, or a home movie? What sort of medium would each of these have originated on? Moreover, video is, and has been almost since its birth, an umbrella term for a bewildering variety of formats. The domestic ones and some of the professional formats are well known, others less so: VHS, S-VHS and VHS-C, V 2000, Betamax, U-matic, Hi-band, Beta SP, Video-8 and Hi-8, MII, MAC and D-MAC, and so on. But now that people can work directly on computers to generate their imagery and sound, are you sure that the music or titles at least, if not much more, on your favourite tapes haven't been derived from magnetic or laser media, such as floppy discs, CD-I, Laservision? Public playback incorporates another family of media, including arcade screens with moving environments, video walls, projection, stereo screens in mask-and-glove systems. And what of the changes they have gone through to reach the familiar low-resolution screen – with relatively few points of light or 'pixels' per square inch – of the domestic television? An ordinary piece of work may have drawn in

materials originally recorded in print, lithograph, cylinder or disc sound recording, and any one of the myriad formats of film in use now and in the past, still and moving. But to reach video playback at home or in the workplace, it will have transferred those original sounds and images, perhaps several times, adapting and modifying them with each shift. It would be wise to be as aware of these processes of transfer as it is to be wise to the ways that cameras are used to select from the events of the world those moments, and those aspects of those moments, which someone has deemed significant in post-production as well as production itself.

Video playback is a handy centre to begin our enquiry. since it is there, most clearly, that the processes of production, of textuality and of reading all meet. Contemporary Hollywood feature film production is quite cognisant of the importance of video markets to the long-term profitability of its films. Some films are made with that eventual home specifically in mind. In cinema, the shape of the image is described as its aspect ratio, the ratio between the vertical and horizontal dimensions. The standard TV screen matches none of the standard aspect ratios of cinema, which means that too much or too little of the original frame is transferred to the TV screen, most obviously in the telecine transfer of CinemaScope films, in which a sizeable proportion of the image area is lost unless a letterbox format is employed, leaving much of the TV image area unused. A film like Coppola's *One From the Heart* (1983) was shot in the old Academy Standard aspect ratio specifically to ease the transfer to the small screen. Contemporary films shot in wide screen formats such as CinemaScope are often composed in such a way that action in any one sequence occurs in a specific area of the frame, again easing the processes of transfer to the narrow confines of existing broadcast TV ratios. Editing procedures, likewise, often produce a cinema ('release') version and a TV version, cut to match the demands of family viewing, leaving out the sweeter sex and flamboyant violence that would offend network schedulers and their advertising clients or the constraints of British video censorship laws.

The music business, too, has reformulated its marketing strategies to match the demands of video. No new recording contract is complete without provision for a promotional video, and acts can increasingly expect to up their earnings both through broadcast airtime on specialist programmes or dedicated channels like MTV,

and by means of the sell-through market, where video albums and EPs take an increasingly prominent share of the market. It's a common complaint that pop acts must be visually attractive as well as musically, now that the industry has to rely so strongly on visual impact via video. Of course, this visual aspect of pop has a long history (cf. Goodwin 1992), certainly as far back as the music halls, where stars like Marie Lloyd were as famous for their performances as their singing. But pop video has altered, if not intensified, this visual relationship with the stars. The visual appeal, especially of stars working in the teenage market, is more than a marketing tool: it is an intrinsic part of the product, where 'product' is defined as what can be sold to the public. The public now buys videos as well as audio recordings, in a way that it could not previously buy a performance to take home. At the same time, simple documentary records of performances tend to sell less well than productions designed for repeated viewing, using the panoply of devices that have become familiar as music video: elaborate *mise-en-scène*, rapid cutting, special effects and storylines (even if they take the form of fractured narratives largely subordinated to the performance image and musical repertoire of the artist). The music business, like film, has begun to adapt to the position of video in the complex of media in which we now live.

Video is a frequent adjunct to scientific and technological work: videos derived from ultra-sound scans of intra-uterine foetal development or from X-ray photography of fractures in engineering components under stress. It is a major tool of education and corporate communications, and is also central to electronic networks such as databases, E-mail, electronic bulletin boards and newsletters. It has a place in policing and the law, where it is used for taking evidence, and in psychotherapy, where it has been developed as a tool for analysis of body-language and group interaction. The home video camera is used for everything a still camera did before, and much still imagery is now produced using magnetic rather than photochemical media, both at home and, in an explosion of use, in commercial photography for advertising, editorial and publicity (cf. Wombell 1991, Ritchin 1990, Bishton, Cameron and Druckery 1991). Amateur video makers showcase remarkable work in conventions and festivals around the world, and they support a major wing of the magazine trade, regularly sharing shelf space with their spiritual neighbours, the computer

and photographic papers, magazines more often than not produced using video technology.

Video is, then, at the heart of the increasingly interlinked webs of previously separate media. I don't want to make any imperial claims for the medium, however: quite the opposite. No matter how a magazine is produced, we consume it more or less in the same way. A film using laser effects, film effects or computer effects is still a film if we consume it in the cinema. Certainly, there are nuances in such texts that will evoke specific responses. Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991) feels different from his *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* of the previous year, though both had their première as theatrical movies and shared some stylistic and thematic tendencies. *Terminator 2* (1991) has more in common with the pioneering optical wizardry of Méliès than it has with thermal imaging of uninsulated housing. But all of these cultural forms share, potentially if not actually, another existence as electronic information prepared for display on a video screen or projector. At the heart of this argument is a feeling that video is neither an autonomous medium, free of all links with other forms of communication, nor entirely dependent on any one of them.

It's for this reason that discussions of video need to be prefaced with a caveat against essentialism. There is no essential form of video, nothing to which one can point as the primal source or goal of video activity. It isn't intrinsically good or bad and, as Roy Armes argues, 'continual technological development makes it increasingly difficult to pin down a fixed identity' (Armes 1988, p.1). At the same time, it is important to note that video cannot be narrowed down to a subset of television, either in practice or theoretically. There is a special relationship between video and broadcast television, one that accounts for the majority of video practice today: video cameras, video editing, video viewing. But that is only one of the relationships into which video enters and, though statistically important, it does not exhaust (and should not be allowed to exhaust) its potentialities, potentialities which are, precisely, the relationships into which it enters.

The phrase 'video media' is chosen specifically to disrupt such a centring of video as single, uniquely this or that, essentially something. By using the plural form, I want to indicate that video works across a plurality of relationships, plundering other media for sources and channels, rarely pursuing an imagined goal of pure

video, video in and of itself. Such a beast, I believe, could not exist. Video, a core element of the multimedia devices and networks into which, increasingly, people in industrial societies are connected, is nevertheless only a part of that world, a single aspect. If, as seems possible, we are to be invited to purchase home office and entertainment machines which will combine the functions currently shared between the computer, the TV, the hi-fi and various domestic and financial technologies – telephony, banking, security, thermostats, shopping, and perhaps newsprint, letter post, facsimile, photocopying and who knows what else – if so, the video monitor will play an even more central role in social life. This multimedia environment is, in more dispersed form, characteristic of our period of history.

In general, this book eschews futurology. Guessing the shape of the future from present trends is fraught with perils. Instead, I want to engage with the state of play now, at the time of writing and in the immediate past. Video media are currently changing the way we interact, perhaps less profoundly than some commentators would have us believe, but nonetheless in significant ways. Whether that will continue, we have no way of knowing. There seems little reason to doubt the medium-term continuance of technological development, or the widening of the gap in levels of access to it between industrialised and developing nations. Nonetheless, decisions are being made today which will affect the eventual shape of the media technologies we can expect to see in that medium-term future, decisions which at present are being made entirely on military and commercial grounds. This book is intended to open up the debate over those developments, to point to alternative routes into the future, and to offer some ways of thinking about our choices that go beyond the assumed triumph of global capitalism. So, rather like the subject which it covers, this book has no pretensions to permanent, intrinsic value. Once its moment is past, it will retain only some small documentary value, whether the avenues described here are followed up or closed off on the way to global standardisation of technologies and products.

There is no video theory in the way that there is a body of knowledge called film theory or, rather differently, television studies. There never will be. Not being really a simple and discrete entity, video prevents the prerequisite for a theoretical approach: that is, deciding upon an object about which you wish to know. Yet

there is a field in which a variety of intersecting activities gather around the video apparatus: the field of culture. The word culture, too, has its complex histories and conflicting definitions, largely because it is itself complex and contradictory. Thought of culturally, video is both a symptom of the societies in which it has emerged and is being used, and a tool in their further development. Materialist philosophy insists that culture, like the societies in which it is inextricably suffused, is at once a product, a site and a source of struggle. Whether we think of that struggle as one over power, truth, meaning, wealth or some other great abstraction, the words culture and struggle are inseparable. What we have gained, what we wish to see happen, we must fight for. So the attempt to understand what video does cannot be a passive, distanced or objective gaze from the sidelines: it must be an active participant in the wider cultural struggle, just as video practice is. Writing about video is writing about some small areas of this wider domain, a strand of cultural studies or media studies rather than an autonomous discipline of its own.

At the same time, video practice offers important challenges to media theory. Like culture as an object of study, video demands a holistic approach, investigating all the determinations focused upon and opportunities latent within a given situation. Like culture, video requires an historical understanding in order to clarify its present functioning. And because it operates in so many domains of social life, it needs to be addressed using all the techniques at our disposal. It was argued above that video is not reliant upon the camera for its images (or the microphone for its sounds). Video is thus freed of its dependence upon the real world which the camera must record, even though the camera is a tool in the hands of an operator, whose ideological formation constrains the breadth and style of images captured. With video, we no longer need to restrict ourselves to issues of representation, in practice or in theory: much video work is simply uninterested in representing the world as it is or might be. That representational job is only one of its functions. In video media, the moving and the still image attain the kind of autonomy from the demands of the everyday world which was attained in Europe by painting at the end of the nineteenth century, and by music with the rise of the symphony at the time of Haydn and Beethoven. Yet the histories of the arts should alert us to the pitfalls of autonomy, the dangers and responsibilities that emerge along

with a new freedom. Considered as a medium or family of media, video needs to be understood in close relation to the development of art.

For this reason, *Videography* is composed of two sections, the first dealing with theory, the second with practice. In the theory section, various approaches to twentieth century media are raided for ideas in relation to sample video practices. Looking at ideas and histories of art, film, television and music allows us to think about video in terms of similarities and differences with each mode of practice. It encourages discussion of the ways in which video practices pick up on and re-echo concerns of practitioners and theorists in these neighbouring domains. The comparison makes it possible to unpack the useful and the impractical elements of theoretical systems, and test them against the demands of video culture. In particular, such comparisons make up the dialectical links of an argument which is intended to play upon the problematic relationship of art and culture.

These two terms resist definition but, in terms of video media: 'art' describes an approach centring on the problem of autonomy, of what happens when a medium is set free – or cast adrift – from a necessary connection with daily life. 'Culture', on the other hand, is the approach which insists that there is an unbreakable bond between the specificity of video practices and the generality of social life. The dialectical relationship between these two contrary approaches is what shapes the arguments of the whole work. Should we try to understand video as somehow separate from the rest of the human universe? Or must we accept its place as a servant of a social and economic formation which subordinates its free development to the demands of the market place? On the art route lies a lonely toil without redeeming social purpose, chasing the purity of absolute freedom. On the culture track lies subjection to an economic system which, on present showing, is hell-bent on the destruction of the planet and most of its population. By looking into this small domain of practice (almost arbitrarily defined by the group of media involved) this book intends to explore the interplay of these two positions as they are worked through in the making of video culture by producers and viewers alike.

In the second part are analyses of specific tapes and uses of tape which seem to bring to the fore this dialectical relation. These analyses are open-ended, in the sense that there can be no defining

conclusion to the debate or to the dialectic in which it situates itself. I have had to rely to a great extent on my own enthusiasms and experiences in writing on video. If it is true that there has come into being a transnationally dominant culture, largely based in the English-speaking world, whose major goal is to maximise profits, then it is unsurprising that that goal be pursued by dominating the marketplace. Large corporations gauge their success less by units sold than by market share (the percentage of total sales which have accrued to them). The purpose of this method of accounting is to minimise the competition in a given market and to exclude, especially, newcomers, who might not only take away sales, but alter the parameters of the market itself. This happened in the 1970s with the break-up of IBM's market dominance as new firms entered the computer area, bringing with them a new style of user-friendly software and a redefinition of computing as a suitable technology for small businesses and leisure. The video market has experienced, as yet, no similar break-up. So the tapes that I have viewed are largely the ones I have sought out, none of them as familiar as the films, DIY and music tapes that dominate the world's rental and sell-through shelves. Some contact addresses are provided at the end of the bibliography to help the reader find these and other tapes that have so far evaded the attentions of network TV and chain store buyers. There will undoubtedly be more work, even by the time this book appears in print, which will demand the redefinition of the arguments in it.

Finally, the combined address to art and culture is intended to delineate the limits to development of video media under current conditions. The works analysed here are as good as those in any medium in the last decade: as emotionally demanding, as rich in texture, as profound in thought. Yet there is a constant feeling of disappointment that seeps through, a sense that should be nurtured and expanded upon. If work of this calibre is not yet enough, what should we be demanding of our culture? We should demand, precisely, what we have not got. What we lack so thoroughly, what is central to any culture yet missing in ours, and what is apparent in the best work written up here, is hope. By denying that we are satisfied with what is on offer in the dominant culture, we keep the doors open for something better. Only blind acceptance of the current state of affairs, even of its best moments, condemns us to unending repetition of the everyday.