

carefully question the rest of us about whether or not he was getting fat. He would also stick his finger out through his pants and wiggle it, making it look very much like the real thing. Some students put the camera on their friends, more I think to check out their responses than to get the picture itself. These spontaneous outbursts of inner feelings help everyone become more comfortable with themselves and each other.

Our equipment is not portable so we are restricted to studio work. Students come up with stories or vignette sequences that are rich with fantasies and fears of violence, love, power and death. A girl writes a script about finding a lover. Or, a timid boy acts out a murder. On another tape, a boy tries to attract a girl and when she rejects him - poof! - he makes her disappear.

Sometimes something is said about relationships within the class if the student himself chooses who is to perform on his tape. Some students' tapes force intimacy by staging fights, or love scenes, or by having students show more of their bodies than

they usually do.

Each student's idea for taping is an expression of the self deep inside wanting to come to the surface in some form and wanting to be accepted. Whether the individual knows it or not, this happens. Since dramatic tapes are conceived of as entertainment and, in successful ones, there is joy shared in the producing, even the most repulsive fantasies can in the end be accepted as human. Kids feel closer to their friends in class after having expressed ideas that might in other forms appear too frightening, too loving, or too ambitious. Seeing others act your ideas on tape legitimizes and lends reality to what was once secret.

There is a strong need among psychiatric patients to feel useful enough to perform a task and to feel equal to other people in doing and thinking what comes naturally. Very few other activities in my experience have been as compelling and have offered so much toward these needs as has the use of videotape.

Aesthetics of the Portapak

PHILLIP LOPATE

The portable videotape camera-and-tape deck system, or "portapak," has been called by some, the most revolutionary breakthrough in media since Gutenberg. From the evidence of the ½ inch videotapes produced so far, this remains to be seen; yet it is easy to understand the enthusiasm of portapak fanatics, if not always to agree with them. The portapak represents a simple-to-operate technology which can come into the hands of a large number of users. One portapak can go a long way in a community if used democratically. Moreover, it makes it possible for one person to be the producer, director, and cameraperson of a videotape.

Visceral Documentaries

The excitement of shooting on location is like that shiver once produced in audiences by neo-realist cinema, when the historical conditions of liberated Italy forced a kind of shooting on the run, as filmmakers went into the streets and seemed to find fresh material everywhere. Portapak users have accomplished something equivalently new in documentary work by uncovering corners of neighborhood life that had always been neglected by professional crews.

However, where Rossellini or, later, direct-cinema documentarists like Leacock were able to mediate fresh footage into an intelligent narrative whole, the average portapak cameraman fritters away

novel subjects because he does not know what he is looking for. Panning a hand-held camera from face to face, from store to street, he tries to make the eye do all the selective work instantaneously that the brain should be in on. Videotape, by the ease with which it can be kept running, encourages the operator to find solutions through a reaction to visual stimuli as they are thrown at him. The impulse is to forego preliminary analysis and "dig into reality." The fact that the reality captured in this way is only as subtle as an individual's defensive reaction time does not get questioned.

Let us take the example of a birthday party. (But a protest march or a street fair would be just as good.) The tendency is to shoot into the thick of things. But greatest density also yields greatest overlap of planes, and since the video camera is poor at giving depth perspective, you get low definition information when you play back. It would be wise for the user to take two or three seconds extra to analyze what details are worth recording. Yet the anxiety to get it all down leads to a rapid glossing over of surfaces. The familiar figure-8 eye movement which is a natural way to look at crowds is not necessarily a good way to convey visual information to an audience. In hand-held portapaks, the emphasis is placed on having the camera follow the path of the eye. The only problem with this is that the taped image can never duplicate what the

eye sees. For one thing, the cameraman is positioned in a 360 degree setting and is aware, through peripheral vision, of objects that will never get on the tape. For another, the portapak user unconsciously supplies more three-dimensionality than will emerge on the taped image. And we cannot even go into the vagaries of framing, since whatever appears on the borders of a televised image differs from one set to the next. In short, what you see is not necessarily what you get.



Dan Edelman

Some advocates of portapak videotaping seem to feel that the biological closeness between camera and operator create a warmth which makes up for whatever difficulties in following the action may result. And indeed, an umbilical connection between camera, eyepiece and user is one of the main aspects of the portapak style. This has been shown to greatest advantage in certain dance videotapes, when the cameraman has entered into the mood of the movement (not necessarily mimicking as flowing with the thing recorded) so that dance and camera become harmonious. One cameraman told me that all the shots in his videotape were based on a sequence of Tai Chi movements. This may be more fun to shoot than to watch.

The portapak, as it has been used so far, has a provisceral and anti-intellectual bias. Which may be one of its charms. But we should keep this in mind when claims are made that the videotape image manages an objective description of reality.

Lighting

The standard, black and white portapak camera is quite good at registering an image in almost any lighting situation. There is often no need to bother with studio lights, and so videotape users get into

the habit of working with available natural lighting. This produces a "sameness" in lighting tone which links many videotapes to each other, as if part of a visual family. It would be risky to attempt to generalize about this lighting tone, but I would say that it inclines toward a Confucian medium. Sharp contrasts, the highs and lows, sculptural and three dimensional shadowing as well as crepuscular delicacies are all lost on it; in the same way that the subtleties of night scenes in old movies are

washed away by a uniform blur when televised.

On the other hand, domestic interiors videotaped in daylight have a vivacity which film often lacks. The camera drinks in kitchens, sofas, schoolroom sunlight. The world of the afternoon is Videotape's dominion. One is pulled in videotape toward a normative or everyday quality of light, which those with a hunger to believe in a normal world would call realistic. Natural lighting is often very beautiful and satisfying. The only regret is that by ignoring the art of lighting we encourage that passivity of mind which is satisfied with anything the videotape camera registers, and deny the medium an expressive potential.

Scale and Depth of Field

The videotape image is domestic, intimate, quotidian. Not only is TV a home medium but the subjects it treats most relaxedly are familial, or warmed-over until they become familial. Films distort by giving the human body a majesty and monumental luminosity it cannot live up to in real life. TV distorts the other way: everything is made homey, slightly mediocre, understandable, human-all-too-human. Johnny Carson and Dick Cavett are television personalities who could never be movie

stars. To pass from TV to film is like Gulliver traveling from the Lilliputians to the land of giants.

Even government leaders who commit astonishing acts of terror on the world are curiously non-threatening, like Howdy-Doody puppets. How can we take their menace seriously when they are ten or at most twenty inches big?

Not only the human body, but everything in Nature is made underwhelming. The Grand Canyon is reduced to a few sine curves. The videotape image is a bit like a papier-mache diorama. The viewer must work harder to achieve an illusion of three-dimensionality, because video photography is less able than film photography to achieve depth of field.

The importance of deep-focus photography has been an aesthetic issue in film criticism ever since the early 1940s. Andre Bazin, the great French critic, argued that films which opened up the plane of focus like Citizen Kane were a gain in the presentation of reality, because they allowed the spectator to follow actions within a spatial continuity, "a unity of time and place." Montage, which selects the significant detail preliminarily for the viewer, was replaced by a more fluid camera style that panned or tracked the characters from room to room in long-duration takes. Thus depth of focus gave the spectator more freedom, like the theater-viewer, to choose which part of the picture was significant.

One can argue with Bazin's assertion that deep-focus filmmaking automatically brings us closer to reality. But in one sense the argument seems true: depth of focus reunited characters with their backgrounds, their physical environment. Architecture, ceilings, windows, furniture -- the trappings of history became the objective envelope in which a man's destiny, however private or idiosyncratic (like Kane's) would have to unwind. No longer would it be easy to divorce a man's aspirations from his time and milieu -- which, from the standpoint of historical consciousness was something to be pleased about.

A Drama of Faces

If we are at all sympathetic to the deep focus viewpoint, then videotape would seem to be a step away from realism. The background definition is very slight. The portapak camera systems give little information beyond the central subject. The viewer supplies his own backgrounds largely through memory: a blur of faces at the ball game connotes a crowd; a corner of a kitchen table conjures up an apartment.

Most videotape scenes begin with a medium shot of the subject or subjects from the stomach up. Then a zoom into one of the faces. A love of faces is not compulsory for videotape work, but it helps. There is the tendency to isolate the face in its flower-like separateness (separate not only from the surround-

ing environment, but from the trunk of the body.) The frown lines on the brow seem to be struggling to convert themselves into words issuing from the lips.

It is with this stumbling struggle to articulate that the viewer identifies, and that gives videotape much of its shock of recognition.

The popularity of soap operas is directly linked to this dramatic struggle to say the unsayable -- to turn thought into confession. The camerawork, which is fairly stylized, promotes the sensation of the stress and difficulty of interaction, with its constant threat of a misunderstanding, through a pattern of closeups and reverse shots. The tension is built up by cutting from one closeup to another, including having the frowning actor digest words spoken off screen, until a release takes place through a shot combining both figures.

The persuasiveness of the soap opera in the face of its obvious plot absurdities, comes largely from the camerawork which hits at the viewers' anxieties about interactional misunderstandings, by denying the spatial connection between one man and another, by isolating each in his inner mood.

Consider another afternoon television show, the Watergate Hearings. The hearings illustrate some of the problems of respecting spatial continuity in videotape reportage. Because of the physical setup of the committee room it would be difficult to combine both accuser and accused in a single angle. Moreover, this is probably not even seen as desirable. The drama is built out of alternating closeups, inquisition and response (as in Dreyer's Passion of Joan of Arc.) Thus, although witnesses and investigators are in the same room they do not seem to occupy the same shared space. The implication grows that they are on different moral planes or from different galaxies - a dangerous impression, however much the camerawork, or our own sympathies might lead us to think.

The split screen device, with its black line running down the middle, if anything exaggerates the box-like isolation of the two sides: Haldeman/Baker; Demon/Knight, depending on how your prejudices run. The split screen image eerily isolates both men in another way: neither subject is engaging the other's eye contact within the frame.

Videotape and the Look of Reality

Many people who use videotape for the first time marvel at how "true to life" it looks. It is not only their excitement that a picture of any kind came out. It is also that they feel their own lives have that texture, that lighting, that peculiarly flat grey-and-whiteness they are looking at.

Yet nothing is more tricky in art or popular culture than the assumption that one has finally got hold of a mirror of reality. A technological improvement, a change of fashions make audiences



fickly dissatisfied with the old, 'impoverished reality.' (Stereo speakers will sound tinny next to quad. The Elia Kazan-Rod Steiger brand of drama, which had seemed the very meat of realism in the 1950s, now looks hammy.)

I have maintained that in scale, depth of focus, lighting, camera movement, editing and other ways, the videotape image severely distorts reality. That we accept it generally as a truthful picture of the world testifies to our internalizing a number of highly contrived (if persuasive) conventions and translating them through wishful thinking into an approximate verisimilitude.

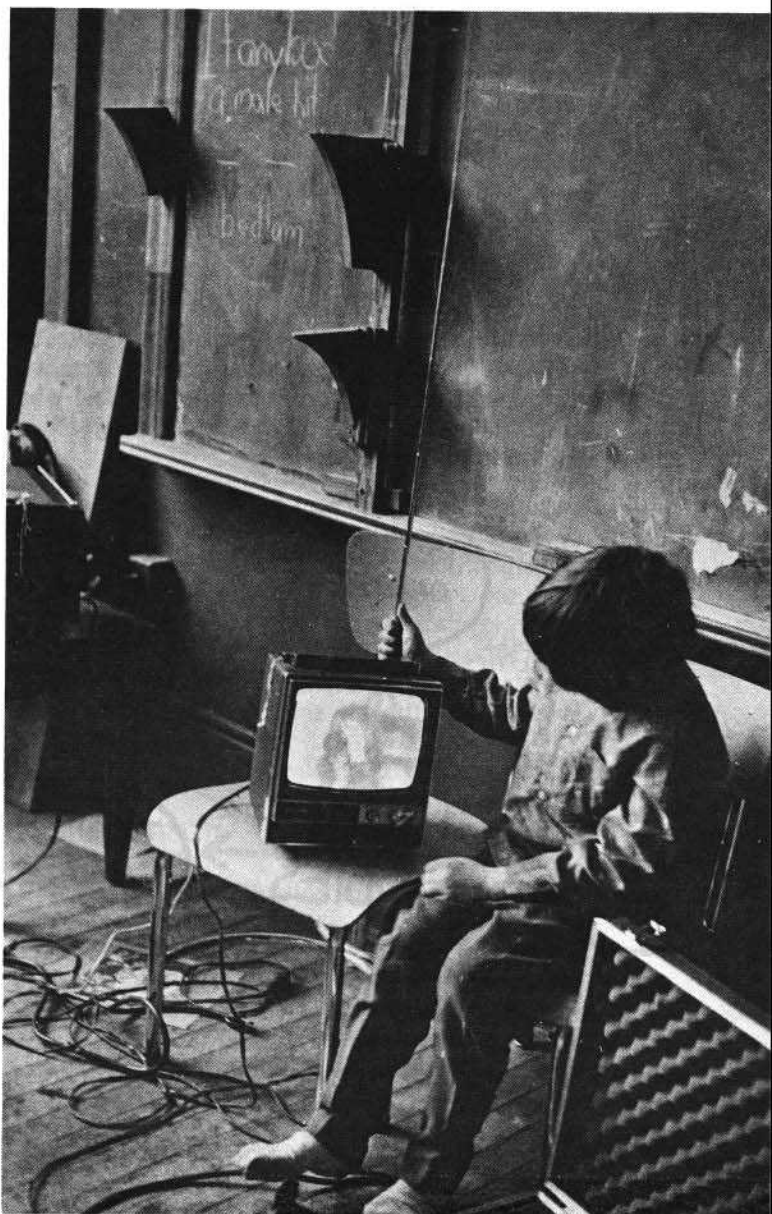
The automatic and unquestioning use of videotape as a reliable documenting agent by government, educational institutions, hospitals, etc. may be bizarre, but it will persist as long as these distorting factors remain invisible. Still it seems a shame for group therapists and psychologists to turn wholeheartedly to videotape as a magic mirror capable of reflecting back a person's behavior and thus modifying it, when they have not taken into consideration certain crucial subjectivities and inaccuracies that creep into the videotape record.

Let me say then that videotape lies. As photographs lie, as movies lie. What next? The future of videotape as an objective witness may be destroyed, but its career as an art medium may have only begun.

Television has been in existence for over twenty-five years – videotape for over ten, and it has still not generated an artist of the originality and stature of a Griffith or an Eisenstein. The question is not whether videotape is an art form. It is undoubtedly that; but one practiced carelessly, and almost unconsciously. "Television is a stream of under-selected images," wrote Susan Sontag. In "big-time" television, dominated by sponsor economics, there is a constant deferral of responsibility as to who will make that final selection. There are plenty of directors and producers, but virtually no auteurs or creators.

In portapak circles, the deferral of responsibility for artistic quality is subtler. It goes under the name of videotape as "process," videotape as "behavioral feedback," videotape as "the People's Medium," videotape as "folk art," videotape as "experience," or videotape as "training people to operate videotape." All alibis. Just many rationalizations for mediocre tapes.

I would hope that the initiative for developing videotape as an art form would emerge from the independents: that is to say, anyone who can lay hands on a portapak. But before that promise can be realized it will be necessary for videotape enthusiasts to approach their job with more rigor. They will need to analyze and to question the images they are getting, like the best of the experimental filmmakers (Straub, Godard, Michael Snow); they will need to break the seductive spell of a technology that seems only too happy to control itself and a "realism" that is at bottom, false.



Mary Sheridan