Video, Computers, and Memory

Recently, Sony Corporation ran an ad for its Handycam video camera that targeted middle-aged, male baseball fans. The close-up photo shows an old bat, a ball, a glove, and a Handycam. On the ball you can read the inscription, I958 City Champs. The boldface ad copy below the picture reads: “They all bring back memories of your old baseball pals. But with the Sony, there won’t be a single error.” The rest of the ad bemoans the fact that the reader of the ad can't recall some of the players on his championship team and instructs him to purchase a Handycam so his son can relive his baseball memories free of error. The copy ends, “The Sony Handycam. It's everything you want to remember.”

Video is a technology of memory. There are other technologies of memory. Other ways to create a “remembrance of things past.” It will be a while before video finds its Proust, but the need is already evident in Sony's ad. The ad is symptomatic of what happens when video caters to “everything you want to remember.” Celebrating video as error-free memory has its pitfalls. Simply by selecting material for later showing, the camera person “conceals” other material that may be important to remember.

What about the involuntary memory Proust cultivated? What about those things you may not want to remember but need to remember? Is not catering to desirable memories a prescription for living in a video cocoon of nostalgia? What is the consequence of preselecting memory? How can we remember what we conceal with the camera? What happens to perception if the camera is used primarily to gather material for memory—does it not atrophy? Moreover, the old baseball glove may have a smell that triggers memories video simply cannot match—what about them?

A full understanding of video and memory would require a rigorous comparison between video and other technologies of memory, such as oral recitation, print, and holography. It would also require linking these technologies to the human sensorium. Such a study is beyond the scope of what can be accomplished here. In this exploratory essay, I can only suggest ways of approaching the issue of video and memory. I begin by focusing on the fact that video memory is currently being joined with another odorless memory technology, the computer. After twenty years of experience with video, I am nervous about this marriage of convenience. Let me say why.

Computers digitize knowledge. They transform it into information stored in binary units. Once knowledge is digitized, it can be manipulated in an incredible range of ways. For example, video images are now being digitized and manipulated by computer to show people what they would look like if they wore this or that hairstyle. Computers can alter photos or simulate video images of real things in ways that are undetectable. In itself, this is a technological achievement to be applauded. But soon we will no longer be able to trust that the recognizable image on videotape was made when someone pointed the camera at something real.

I'm not against the simulation of possibilities by computers. I think imagining possibilities is all to the good, especially if it involves all the complexity at our command with computers. My concern is that the computerization of video information will detach video images from reference to what we see in our daily lives. Odorless electronic memory systems will create powerful information banks in arbitrary digital storage devices with no grounding in the world familiar to our senses.

So what to do? Obviously, there is no way to call off the liaison between video and computers. But there are other connections to be made with video that could keep the video-computer hybrid from becoming a loose cannon on the rolling deck of memory. What I have in mind is developing patterns that connect video with perception, ecology, mortality, and relationships. In so doing, we can help ensure that the mediation of memory by video in a computerized culture does not trap us in a smog of digitized nostalgia but helps us gain some freedom for a human future.

back to top

Perception

A video camera enables you to push the envelope of your perception beyond anything premeditated. Because the video recorder assumes full responsibility for remembering what is perceived, the videomaker can take perceptual risks: he or she can forget to remember what is being perceived and cultivate a Zen state of watchfulness for whatever can be found through the viewfinder. While this watchfulness can also be cultivated to some extent with film, other factors come into play with video. I am thinking of the alpha state of brain waves associated with the electronics of television for videomaker and viewer alike. One pioneer video artist, Al Robbins, now deceased, developed a technique of punctuating the tape he shot with trigger cuts every few seconds. He explains this technique as a way to keep himself from becoming mindlessly fascinated by what he saw in the viewfinder—as if he were repeatedly slapping himself on the head to make sure he wasn't dreaming. Robbins did not trust the Zen/alpha state. He cultivated a meta-Zen state. The beauty of the tapes he made demonstrates that meta-Zen is not a contradiction in terms, at least in the case of Al Robbins. He kept his mind active and alive behind the camera by constantly interrupting himself. To watch his tapes is to learn a different way of seeing.

In my own tape making, I developed a different approach. I learned T'ai Chi Chu'an and developed a handheld camera style based on continuous T'ai Chi movements. The T'ai Chi enabled me to "meditate in motion" through the camera. I was challenged by the sheer capacity for duration of perception a half hour or more of videotape makes possible. About twelve years ago I did thirty-six continuous half-hour tapes in a variety of sites, T'ai Chi-style, without any trigger cuts. I was pushing the envelope of video perception, trusting the camera to remember for me. My Zen state was not perfect, but good enough that I could "be there" for maybe eighteen minutes of a half-hour tape done while standing in the middle of water flowing over rock. It was a quite wonderful thing to do. I was able to free my perceptions from the burden of memory and attach my attention to flowing water. I doubt if any computer could simulate the singularity of such perceptual risk-taking. Moreover, the video record of what I saw could be shared with others. Video invites the development of a whole range of such techniques for enlivening and sharing perception.

back to top

Ecology

The ecology is an ensemble of recurring events: tides changing, leaves falling, birds migrating, and so on. Video and television can be used systematically to monitor the recurring events of a local ecology for the people who live in that ecology.

The traditional technology of oral memory has worked through the centuries in terms of what are called commonplaces. Shakespeare had everybody in Elizabethan England talking about the question of "To be or not to be." There was a finite set of recurring themes to which everybody referred, which was the glue that held the community together. A shared perception of the recurring ecological events that are common to a place could, in fact, become the commonplaces of an electronic memory. Falsification of these commonplaces by computer would be very difficult, since people could go out and have a look for themselves anytime they wanted. Video could record and store these events as they recurred and changed, over generations. Marrying our electronic memories to the ongoing perceptible events of the ecology would give us a reliable reference system, free of the arbitrariness and contradictions possible with digitized, computerized authority. With an electronic memory married to ongoing ecological events, human mortals would stand a better chance of thriving from generation to generation. Such a memory system may even help us regenerate our despoiled planet. Once such a memory system was in place, computers could be used to simulate the consequences of different policies and practices for our ecological systems, before we risked implementing them.

back to top

Mortality

The species that destroys its ecology destroys itself. Clearly, humans can now destroy the ecologies of the earth. We are an endangered species. This status changes our approach to immortality. No human is immortal if the species goes extinct. “Immortality” depends on the human practice of remembering the dead. This practice is part of what makes us human. Different cultures have remembered their dead in ways that range from the burial mounds of Native Americans to the realistic busts of the Romans. With video we have the image of the deceased “live on tape." Such an image is much more powerful than any computer simulation of a person or any computer readout about a person's life. As home video becomes increasingly diffused through the culture, more and more people will be dealing with the fact of death remembered through video replay of a deceased family member. How do we configure the emotions unique to this new condition? My sense is that we need to ritualize video replay of the dead. The video presence of a deceased loved one can be overwhelming and severely disorienting. It is one thing to chance across a photo of you and a loved one now gone. It is another to find yourself live on tape with someone you loved, now deceased, during a replaying of random videotapes. Ritual sets up a situation where emotions can be experienced in a crisis-proof context, one that is usually supplied by a secure cosmology, an overarching story in which the life of the deceased finds meaning and that meaning is shared by the living. In this context of shared meaning, emotions of loss can be fully experienced. The fact that we are now an endangered species has shaken the security of every traditional context of shared meaning. We need to develop a new cosmology, a new story that reckons with our ecological situation and allows us to organize our relationships accordingly. It seems to me that only in the context of such a new story can we invent stable rituals that allow us to replay the dead live on tape. Given the flexibility of electronic information technologies, we have the possibility of telling the story in a non-narrative way that avoids the patterns of dominance associated with logocentric “master narratives." Another way of saying this is that we can encode cosmology in a way that is sensitive to chaos and responsive to local knowledge.

back to top

Relationships

Depth psychology is said to have begun with photography. I think video is initiating a new dimension of understanding that as yet has no formal name or discipline. But it has to do with relationships, ways of interacting, the sorts of issues that family therapists have worked with since the fifties.

As we work to find proper ways to balance our relationships with the living, we will continue to suffer the deaths of those we love and hold live on tape. Records of interaction kept in a family over generations could help untangle family knots, keep the children from repeating the errors of their parents. Maybe.

Humans care about their relationships. Birth and death are catastrophes that drastically change patterns of relationships. Video replay offers us a way to help balance relationships among the living. This possibility was never more apparent to me than in an extraordinary video experiment I made with a friend.

My friend and I recorded a conversation between us using full-body shots on a split screen. We were seated facing each other. A week later we played the tape back using slow motion and no sound. We sat facing the screen, each of us imitating the gestures of the other on the screen and creating conversation on the basis of the motions. Holding my head and rocking back and forth in imitation of my friend, I found myself saying, “Yeah. I'm listening to what you're saying, Ryan, but I'm really getting ready to strike back.” Following my imitation of a diminutive hand gesture, I said, “Let me make it nice and small, Ryan, so that you can understand it." My friend was articulating my nonverbal attitudes in a similar way, and we were laughing our heads off. What was even more extraordinary was that when I woke up the next morning, I felt as if I was wearing his body. I called him up and started telling him how I felt about the relation between his/my stomach and shoulders, stomach and torso, torso and legs, and so forth. In each case he confirmed that my feeling was accurate. For the next few weeks I could recall the sense of his body whenever I wanted. Video

replay had made possible an extraordinary degree of imitation and empathy. Such empathy can make a real difference in balancing relationships, well beyond that made by computerized programs of interaction.

Developing patterns that connect video with perception, ecology, mortality, and relationships can neutralize possible adverse effects of the current video-computer hybrid. To work positively with this hybrid, we need to understand the fundamental difference between video and computers, which can be characterized by two words: complexity and contiguity. Computers enable us to order electronically a multiplicity of parts into a whole—that is, they extend our capacity to deal with complexity. Video, on the other hand, extends our capacity to deal with contiguity, the state of being in actual contact. Addressing contiguity will enable us to better understand the possible falsification of memory inherent in video itself. Heidegger's account of memory is useful here:

Originally, a "memory" means . . . a constant, concentrated abiding with something—not with something that has passed, but in the same way with what was present and with what may come. (Heidegger 1968: 140)

Only because we are by nature gathered in contiguity can we remain concentrated on what is at once present, past and to come. The word "memory" originally meant this incessant concentration on contiguity. (Heidegger 1968: 145)

We are in actual, continuous contact with both the past and the future. We are continually gathering ourselves together in terms of what just happened and what will happen next. This is what Heidegger means by saying that "we are by nature gathered in contiguity." Contiguity is a key to understanding video and memory. Videomaking puts you in conscious contact with contiguity. A number of videomakers, myself included, are so struck by this condition that we insist on the value of continuous taping because it trains the mind in contiguity. What is originally felt as boredom develops into a capacity for concentration on what is past, present, and to come.

Contiguity helps explain other techniques of videomaking, such as fading one tape into another rather than making jump cuts, extensive use of slow motion, replaying tapes in reverse, and creating multimonitor pieces that deal with different temporal patterns. The relationship between video and contiguity is especially evident in the work of video artist Gary Hill. Hill did a videotape that is a dramatic rendering of a metalogue between the communication theorist Gregory Bateson and his daughter Catherine. Hill taught the actors who performed the metalogue to say the words backward for the video performance. He then edited this performance tape to correct this initial misorientation. He ran their backward talk forward. What the viewer heard was a strange-sounding but discernible performance of the metalogue. What the viewer saw was an interactive sequence in reverse. As the Bateson character puffs on his pipe, the smoke keeps curling back into the pipe. Hill's multiple reversals of time's arrow celebrate contiguity with indifference toward the past and the future.

Of course, such editing of the past, present, and future is an artistic construct, not an actuality. Video makes the construct possible. The actual past and the actual future do not allow us to be indifferent to them. As we have seen in discussing mortality, the past is never more clearly the past than when we think about the dead. Those absent from us are absent, even if we have them live on tape. Death makes absence final. The brutal fact is that the dead are forever gone from us; our life with them took place in the past. The appreciation for contiguity inherent in video should not confuse this fact. Indeed, the appreciation of contiguity via video is not automatic. The contiguity of video ought not be confused with the contiguity of life itself. Just as literacy has given us an enormous appreciation of language, so video can give us an enormous appreciation of contiguity. Unfortunately, literacy has blinded us to some of the consequences of its silent sequencing. It would be well to be as circumspect as possible about the consequences of video.

As we saw with regard to the Sony ad, there is a way in which video replay can create a false sense of the past for videomakers and viewers alike. This is true even if the camerawork is not predetermined. There is a tendency to remember only those aspects of events that have been recorded and replayed. The video

replay begins to be the criterion for what is worth remembering and what is not worth remembering about events.

In addition to falsifying the past, video replay can falsify the sense of the present. In my own experience, after extensive replay of events involving human interaction—conversations, dancing, car travel—I began to expect that all human interactions were replayable. Unconsciously I was thinking, "Why get fully involved?" Save some emotion for enjoying (and examining) the replay. After all, an unexamined life is not worth living, and video allows us to examine life very closely. It took losing a close friend to reestablish my appreciation for unrepeatable, irreversible events in life.

The possibility of video's creating confusion about the present is especially evident in instant replay, which can blur the difference between present and past. This is clear in video art that uses open-reel recorders. The open reel allows replay after a delay of only a few seconds. The trick is simple: Put two video decks side by side. Because the tapes are not on cassettes, it is possible to thread one tape through both machines. You can then record on the first machine and play back on the second. Two artists, Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, used this technique very effectively at the Howard Wise Gallery show "TV as a Creative Medium" (I969). The piece they did for the show "Wipe Cycle" was complex. I will describe only the aspect of it that helps us to understand instant replay.

The first machine recorded people as they stepped off the elevator into the gallery. The second machine replayed the event to these same people eight seconds later, on a television set in the gallery. Under normal circumstances, having an elevator door close behind you is an event that separates the past from the present. With the eight-second replay, however, past and present became confused; the past did not detach itself from the present. Video extended the sense of the present (being in the gallery) to include the past (being in the elevator) and an event that normally separates the two (stepping off the elevator and having the door close behind you).

To say it another way, instant replay established a continuity over a threshold that was normally a discontinuity. By recording and replaying the passage from one space to another, the artists scrambled the normal distribution of past and present. Strange. People stood watching themselves coming out of an elevator eight seconds ago, absorbing a past that had not been detached from the present.

It is this nondetachment of the past from the present that characterizes what we call instant replay. With instant replay the sense of the present can be extended far beyond eight seconds. Recording the kids opening Christmas presents and then playing the tape back before the excitement dies down can take a good hour. The hour is experienced in one gestalt that includes instant replay.

Video can include the past in a present that grows into the future. Using video to gain some freedom for a human future depends on deepening our understanding of contiguity. In a computerized culture without an understanding of contiguity, the danger is that the power of the computer to calculate complexity will be used to colonize the future. Life will not be allowed to unfold for the young. Managing time will become the be-all and end-all. Even now people have no time—no time for the memories that come with the smells of everyday, no time for friends, no time for family, no time for pain.

Computers cultivate an appreciation for complexity. Video cultivates an appreciation for contiguity. The question becomes this: how do we gather the wisdom to develop a culture that appreciates both complexity and contiguity