How to film a memory: reminiscence and visual media

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Abstract

Film and video have become important means of providing a visual record of reminiscence activity. Stemming from a small research project using iPads to support reminiscence work, during which video footage was shot, the paper questions whether the camera can be simply adopted as a note-taking device or is there a greater potential to be explored in our use of audio-visual media that can expand our knowledge of how people reminisce?

Keywords

Reminiscence systems, reminiscing, mobile media, art, visual anthropology, video, film.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2 User Interfaces (D.2.2, H.1.2, I.3.6).

Introduction

At face value, film and video would appear to offer a simple method of recording reminiscence activity. In this context, the use of the camera as a note-taking device is seen as a fairly straightforward unproblematic method of providing an audio-visual record of reminiscers' personal narratives. However, can researchers afford to accept unquestioningly the transparency of the medium? Video, when considered

as a system of visual representation, has its own set of properties: its scope and limitations. The paper examines some issues that question the nature of film and video. It provides examples from the visual arts and visual anthropology that have aimed to widen the possibilities of video recording and extend the narrative potential of studying the processes of reminiscence, particularly when the material is 'broadcast' via mobile media devices. Furthermore these empirical studies together with theories of memory could become major factors contributing to the design of reminiscing related technology.

Background:
The Art of Memory
In 2010 the University of Ulster funded a pilot research project titled *The Art of* Memory. The intention of the study was to identify the attitudes of older people in using an iPad device to reminiscence as opposed to a photographic card-based approach. The study also attempted to measure the impact of card- versus device-based reminiscing, using the amount of time spent with each image as a measure of impact, and to gather qualitative information on reminiscing using cards versus devices. Another aim of the study was to see if the different types of images – personal, shared experience or generic – made a difference in reminiscing. The study was designed to use the amount of time spent by the participants on each image, as a measure of impact.

While the central findings of this research are discussed elsewhere (REF), the video recordings made during the research project have provided the basis for taking a self-reflexive approach to using the camera in reminiscence work. The background for this reconsideration of the participatory camera can be found in the visual arts and visual anthropology.

The Self-Reflexive Camera
In the late 1960s/early 1970s, the visual arts went through a process of 'dematerialisation' [1]. This both reflected and contributed to the 1960s notion of the 'counter-culture', in that they aimed to revolutionize the traditionally accepted sites for the production and display of art. Such artists as Robert Smithson, Eleanor Antin and Richard Long abandoned the studio and the gallery in favor of artworks made from natural materials produced and sited in the natural environment. However, despite lofty intentions to forsake the commercial world of the art market, the necessity to communicate the occurrence of ephemeral sculptural activities produced in obscure locations became paramount. This placed increased emphasis on the documentation of art. Ironically, it was film, video and photography that became the most acceptable media for display on gallery walls. Nonetheless many such artists following this trend remained fairly insensitive and uncritical in their use of their newly acquired photographic hardware. The situation was summarized by the art critic Richard Cork:

"All too often, the camera tends to be employed as a useful technological convenience rather than as a visual recording device with its own uniquely circumscribed set of capabilities and limitations … The majority of art channeled through the camera needs to consider very carefully whether it can afford so blithely to ignore the acute sensitivity towards the medium which characterizes the painting tradition" [2]

However, some artists had taken heed of such warnings and (reverting to a partly 'modernist' inspired sensibility for exploring on the qualities of their newly adopted media) began to produce work that specifically

investigated and commented on the scope and limitations of lens-based media. For example, while in the US Dan Graham questioned the nature of the video medium, John Hilliard investigated the characteristics of photography in the UK.

Visual Anthropology
Meanwhile some fields in the social sciences were undergoing similar processes. For example n the psychology of perception, James J Gibson's notion of *Ecological Perception* displayed similar sentiments to that of the artists. In this case Gibson moved away from laboratory-based explanations for perception in favor of perceptual systems which have evolved to detect key features of the natural environment. In effect, both artists and psychologists were questioning the ability of the camera images to provide faithful representations [3].

The documentary film of the 1960s might be characterized by its 'observational' approach [4] – e.gs the Direct Cinema of Leacock & Pennebaker which (along with French *New Wave*) also espoused a rejection of the high-tech production values of the cinema studio, preferring a natural setting, low-tech, hand-held camera, non-interventionalist approach. Yet in the final scenes of French *New Wave* Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's film *Chronique d'un été* (1961) [5] feature the two film-makers discussing the success and failures of the footage we have just been watching: the kind of 'acute sensitivity towards the medium' of which Cork (op cit) would have approved. Rouch and Morin had created a landmark in *Cinéma-vérité* moviemaking that became highly influential to a new generation of visual anthropologists. It differed from Direct Cinema, which had been criticized for its naïve realist approach,

imagining an invisible fly-on-the-wall camera, by openly acknowledging the presence of the camera – even to the extent of using it as a tool of provocation.

Filming Memories
Memories and Dreams
The anthropologist Melissa Llewelyn-Davies's film *Memories and Dreams* (1993) provides a unique portrayal of Massai life [6]. As the title of the film suggests, the movie tackles two subjects which, by their very nature, are impossible to film. However, her self-reflexive approach to the filmmaking process creates an intimate portrait of members of the tribe, revealing that their reflections, hopes and fears are not too dissimilar from our own.

"*Memories and Dreams* opens with the Massai gathered round a small television monitor, watching themselves in Llewelyn-Davies's earlier films. The contrast between then and now is the film's central theme; but, as the title indicates, it also strays into previously unexplored areas of Massai experience and anthropology" [7]

The use of footage shot some twenty years earlier provides the stimulus for individuals to reflect upon the past and to consider how their lives will turn out in future. Together with the sensitive approach taken by an interviewer (Llewelyn-Davies herself) who knows her subjects extremely well, the film acts as a vehicle for an intricate web of retrospections and anticipations. Not only are the subjects obviously aware of the camera's presence, but at certain instances they embarrass the interviewer by turning the questions on her. Ironically she appears not quite so willing to divulge the

intimacies of her lifestyle to the same degree that she expects of the Massai.

"Altered States"
A more unusual employment of this type of technique was adopted by the anthropologist Linda Connor and filmmakers Tim and Patsy Asch. Using their 1979 movie *A Balinese Trance Séance* as stimulus, they filmed the spirit medium Jero Tapakan watching herself and providing her own commentary on the footage of her in a trance [7]. This provided the material for a new film *Jero on Jero: a Balinese Trance Séance Observed* 1980, which featured her reacting to a new perception of herself [9]. The filmmaking process had created a new sense of personal objectivity both for her and for the viewers. Similar to the Llewelyn-Davies experiment, the camera had provided a platform for revealing thought processes at the same time as enabling the subjects of the films to acquire a unique opportunity to reflect on their lives and past experiences.

Discussion

The paper considers the potential of 'self-reflexion'' from using the video footage of reminiscing to stimulate further reminiscences by others. This might involve a sustained 'episodic' engagement with the subject(s). As an example, the paper will review a short film *Mr. Zevl, the Newsagent* [10]. The film is part of a series of "pocket" ethnographies developed at the University of Ulster. Primarily designed for viewing on mobile devices, they do not attempt exhaustive accounts. Rather, they present "snapshots" of ways of thinking and life experiences - enabling subjects to raise issues of concern to a wider audience. The film synopsis is as follows:

A man in his seventies, Mr Zevl isn't happy working in the village newspaper store in a small village in the Czech Republic. He gives his views on life and expresses his discomfort with his surroundings. When the film returns to interview him some three years later, he has given up the business and reflects on the past, his dilemmas and the decisions he has made. Although concise, this video portrait directly engages with the problems of an ageing population.

figure 1. Mr. Zevl interviewed in his newsagent's store

figure 2. Mr. Zevl reminisces on his past and the decisions he has made

The film is not only intended to raise awareness of 'other' people's lives, but to share aspects of human experience that may cut across social and cultural boundaries. The session concludes with an open discussion on the potentials and promises of self-reflexive reminiscing media designed to be delivered and shared via mobile devices. In addition to critiquing, and evaluating existing technologies for reminiscence, the paper considers how innovative approaches to technology might support new reminiscing practices.

Participating Authors

Terence Wright is Professor of Visual Arts at the School of Art & Design in the University of Ulster. He co-chaired the First Reminiscence Systems Workshop at HCI-2009 in Cambridge, England, and has recently published in the area of visual narratives. He has coedited a special issue of a journal on 'Towards systems in support of reminiscence work'. He ran the ethnographic project *The Interactive Village*: the University of Ulster's contribution to *nm2,* an Integrated Project of the European Union's 6th Framework Programme.

Maurice Mulvenna is Professor of Computer Science at the TRAIL living lab in the University of Ulster. He cochaired the First Reminiscence Systems Workshop at HCI-2009 in Cambridge, England, and has recently published in the area of pervasive technologies supporting people with dementia, including reminiscing work and has co-editing a special issue of a journal on 'Towards systems in support of reminiscence work'. His experience in the TRAIL Living Lab working in life story work will bring a perspective from the user communities in reminiscing.

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[9]   *Jero On Jero: a Balinese Trance Séance Observed* 1980 47min Director: Timothy and Patsy Asch with Linda Connor.

[10] *Mr. Zevl, the Newsagent.* 2009 10 Mins *Director:* Terence Wright