

Toward a theory of video.

For the International Video Exhibit, Salerno 82.

Video is a recent species of the class "technical image". He who aims at a theory of video, must therefore consider first technical images. To define them is relatively easy: they are images produced by a technical apparatus, called a "camera" in most cases. But such a definition is ~~innocuous~~<sup>innocuous</sup>: it does not show the radical novelty of technical images as compared to the images of tradition. The novelty is this: whereas traditional images are the result of an effort to represent something through symbols, technical images represent whatever they do represent by chemical, optical and mechanical methods. It therefore looks as if the meaning of technical images, (that what they represent), would represent itself automatically in the image. In other words: it looks as if technical images were "objective representations". This apparent objectivity is both the fascination and the danger inherent in these images, and it explains why we are going through a cultural revolution, which is substituting progressively textual messages by apparently objective techno-images.

It may be shown, however, that the objectivity of technical images is a deliberate illusion. A complex codification goes on during the production of technical images, a codification which is due both to the structure of the camera and to the way it is being handled. And he who says "codification", is saying "symbols". Technical images are just as symbolical as are traditional ones, but they hide this from the receivers of their message. It may be said of technical images that they are structurally mendacious. A world codified by them, (as is ours), is a world meant to deceive. Any future theory of video must take this as a point of departure.

Such a theory is becoming urgent. Videotapes and video records are beginning to invade the market, and the recording and replaying machinery is growing ever cheaper. It is becoming obvious that video is going to replace not only the cinema, the concert hall, the theatre and the sport palace, but also the book in the very near future. Coupled with cable and satellite TV, it is going to become the most important medium of information. And not very much later, once it is coupled with an audiovisual phone, it is going to become an important medium of intersubjective communication. It is therefore nonsense to consider video as if it were chiefly an auxiliary to programmed television and a new "art form". Any worthwhile theory of video must consider it to be a general code of information, just as general as is the alphabet or the code of numerical notation. Any true theory of video must hold its place alongside a theory of written language and a theory of numbers. This is of course quite too early to even envisage. Video praxis is as yet too crude to permit this. We are, all of us, including those who experiment with video, as yet video illiterates. Still: we cannot escape the challenge to try and understand what video is about, unless we were ready to succumb to its fascinating dangers.

What we have to do, first of all, is to emancipate ourselves from the film model which covers video for us. Of course: video is moving pictures just like the film. As if film were its elder brother. But this is not so. Video belongs to an altogether different family of pictures. The film is a descendent of the photograph, this oldest of all technical images, at it seems to move, because a

series of distinct photographs is being projected in such a way to create the optical illusion of motion. Video is based on a point structure, and the motion of its pictures is pointillistic: it is points that flicker. Film motion is wave-like, video motion is sand-like. Two different universes are being represented: film represents the Heraclitian universe of flux, video the Democritian universe of atoms. But, important as it is, this is not the decisive difference between video and film motion. Film represents present motion for future contemplation: what we see while watching a film is past motion. Therefore film is an "historical" representation. Video can be the same, but it can be something totally different. It may represent present motion for present contemplation. Process and contemplation may be synchronically coordinated. This is no longer an "historical", but a "mirror-like" representation. Therefore film is quite unlike video: film is a picture on a wall, video is a mirror. I believe this mirror-like, reflex-like character to be the essence of video, and therefore the center of any theory about it. He who sees a video is seeing the world in a mirror.

But it is a new sort of mirror, for many and confusing reasons. It does not invert right side and left side, as does a traditional mirror. One does not see the world, (and oneself), from one's own point of view in that mirror, but from the point of view of somebody else's. It is a mirror which is also a memory: what it shows can be stored, and contemplated for ever after. It is, at the same time, an ephemeral and an eternal vision. The memory of that wondrous mirror may be manipulated. It may be handled like a book: one may go back to previous views like to previous pages and go forward to future views like to future pages, and one may stop any view for more detailed inspection. But the memory may also be handled in many other ways, some of which may have yet to be discovered. For instance: one may register new views on previous ones like in a palimpsest, or one may erase specific views and substitute them by new ones. One may use the recorded views, (tapes or records), like letters: send them through the mail, and wait for an answer on the same record. One may use the video as a substitute for oneself: it will look and register what it sees while one is absent. One may use it as a spy, and also to look around corners. One may use it to look into inaccessible places like one's own stomach. There seems to be no end to the virtualities of that mirror. Add to this that the video image shines in a cathodic light, which is the only light we know that does not come, directly or indirectly, from the Sun, and you will begin to see what sort of diabolical gadget is penetrating our world.

Any future theory of video will have to consider each point I have mentioned, (and many more I did not mention), in detail. But what it will have to do, in all this, is never to lose sight of the fact that it is speaking about a mendacious mirror. Now, he who says "mirror", says "reflexion". Video is, by its very essence, an instrument for reflexion. An instrument meant to reflect "about" the world, and "about" one's position in it. This becomes concretely obvious if one uses the monitor to see oneself as others see you. Of course: a video may be used to represent the world, just as if it were a photograph or a film. But this is an additional use of the video, not the essential one. Video images are, essen'

ally, media for reflexive, philosophical, imagination, not of representative, artistic, imagination. Of course: those two imaginations cross and overlap, and video shows this. But still: it seems to me that video is, for the first time in history, a medium for a philosophy which no longer would be "discursive". No longer based on written texts, on words, on concepts, but based on images, on "ideas" in the strict sense of that term. One staggers if one considers the impact of this.

But any future theory of video will have to keep in mind, not only that video is a mirror, an instrument for reflexion, but also that it is a mendacious mirror, one that pretends to objectivity, while in reality it is a symbolical image. Now a symbol is something that means something else, it is a "signifier" which has a "significance", and it has that significance for those who are capable of deciphering the symbol. This capacity to decipher symbols is synonymous to participation in a convention: the meaning of symbols is the result of a convention, and he who participates in that convention, can both codify and decodify a message in those specific symbols. He who participates in the convention of video codification, can not only decipher its message correctly, but he can also compose video messages correctly. I said, a moment ago, that we are at present, all of us, video illiterates. What I meant was that we have invented a code which we are as yet unable to correctly decipher. This is not as surprising as it sounds: the code of numbers was invented thousands of years ago, (there can be no doubt that numbers are a human invention), and yet we have not yet discovered all the virtualities dormant in numbers. In other words: when video was invented, people could not even imagine what revolution they have brought about, and it is only now that we begin to have a vague intuition of what one can do with it.

Video is mendacious for as long as its message is taken at face value: that it is an objective, non-symbolical, not conventionalized message. Once the convention sustaining video message becomes conscious, once we know how to "read" and "write" video correctly, it will no longer be mendacious. It will stop to pretend to objectivity, and will show clearly the rules and compromises which have been conventionally agreed upon to codify its message. It will show clearly its grammar, its syntax, and its orthography, its conventional order. Now he who says "convention", says "inter-subjectivity": video will stop to pretend to objectivity, and will become, quite consciously, an instrument for inter-subjective reflexion.

This is, I believe, the ultimate aim of any future theory of video: to show that we now possess an instrument which permits intersubjective reflexion. A reflexion which does not reflect upon the world from the point of view of the lonely observer, as traditional philosophy does, but one that reflects upon the world from as many points of view as there are observers, and which coordinates those points of view into an intersubjective vision. This supposes that the equivalence of all possible points of view be admitted, that "ideology" be abandoned. Even now the handling of the video camera shows this equivalence in a concrete way to anybody who has experienced that handling. Should we come to learn the codifying conventions hidden in video, and should we, on the basis of such a theory, learn how to use video correctly, a new way of looking at things, a new vision, would open up, and life would become different.