(Sara Margarita A. 2017)

Linguistic Effects From The Ubiquity Of Cameras

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Abstract

To examine linguistic effects of cameras I use the premise from the film *Rashomon* to present the embellishments individual use in language when describing individual perspective. By relating cameras as a technology of language I anchor what can be described by this technology on how a perspective frames the subject. Referencing McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message," I raise awareness that configuration and total field are vital to the message, and that transcoding brings recorded images into language. Following a discussion of affordances, constraints, and the relationship between cameras and language, I offer guidelines to navigate these complexities.

Definitions

Language – written and oral transference of thought by using recognizable symbols.

Ubiquity – the state of being everywhere.

Iteration – the repetition of a process or utterance.

Context – the information surrounding a subject.

Perspective – the point of view the camera frames its subject.

Assemblage – several separate systems that work together to deliver a shared result.

Spin -- use images to propel a biased narrative.

Introduction

From their ability to capture the uncanny likeness of a subject to the Hollywood film industry, cameras are a technology with a profound impact. Due to their current ubiquity, I examined the relationship between cameras and language to find what influences rising trends in language have on emerging camera technology, and camera technology has on language. I present the way cameras have empowered personal perspectives and given platforms for voices that may have otherwise gone unheard. I explain the common modern assemblage of sharing images online, and the responses that emerge from their communities. By examining a recent event that was recorded, broadcast, and then triggered conflicting public outcry, I provide examples of how these influences shape discourse.

Rashomon: Truth in Perspective

A useful example for teasing out the complexities of cameras and perspective is Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (1950). The story centers on a priest and woodcutter recalling a mysterious event to a commoner, as they take shelter from a storm at the ruined gates of *Rashomon*. They explain they had come from a trial prosecuting the notorious bandit Tajomaru, charged with murdering a samurai and raping his noble new bride. While the priest claims to have witnessed events just before the event, the woodcutter claims to have witnessed events afterwards. At the trial, we witness three versions of the events through the exposition of the bandit, the bride, and a ghostly Samurai. Each tale claims the bandit tricked and trapped the samurai to rape the bride. However, differences appear in emerging tales of the Samurai's death. The bandit claims fault by winning a sword fight. The bride claims fault from the grief of belonging to two men. The samurai claims he committed suicide due to his wife's treachery.

Before the film ends, one last narrative emerges from the woodcutter who is cornered and pressured to reveal that he was actually hiding in the forest witnessing the entire event. In this final perspective, we learn the bride convinces the bandit and samurai to fight to the death, so that she may retain her nobility of belonging to one man. Unwilling, but with no better resolution, both the bandit and samurai dreadfully fight in a state of uncertainty and fear. After narrowly winning, the bandit flees in terror leaving the bride appalled and alone.

The lasting impression of the film addresses truth, and how individual perspective influences the language we use to describe personal experience. The truth is as simple as presented in the story. The oddity is in the language characters used to tell their individual interpretation of events. Kurosawa described the premise of the film as, "Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing" (Wild, 2014, p. 72). While their narratives embedded the truth, each character embellished personal context to the cause of events, when speaking. The camera gave us the medium to incorporate all of the language, enabling us to grasp the message.

Camera Technology

The word "camera" comes from the original Latin term "*camera obscura*", and means *"dark chamber."* "Camera obscura" was a natural phenomenon in history when painters would paint the light projected through a small pinhole of this dark chamber (Introduction to the Camera Obscura). This was the original technology for projecting the external world onto a flat surface. As the name implies, it requires a dark chamber with a small hole to allow outside light to pass through. Cameras offer a fragmented view of reality by capturing light which passes through the device, and storing it in frames of images or a sequence of moving images on a

physical medium (Lameris, 2017, p. 152). As technologies developed, the new medium referred to as "camera", became known as an electronic device that captures images and sound on digital storage.

As a technology, cameras offer a form of expression and communication, much like language. Bruce Mazlish describes a continuum of humanity with technology, regarding technology is an extension of human capability. He states, "Man now can perceive his own evolution as inextricably interwoven with his use and development of tools… We cannot think any longer of man without a machine" (Mazlish, 1967, p. 14). This becomes an iterative process when the technology then influences us. We witness this through cameras, and on screens, by experiencing recorded moments from the past. This offers more opportunity to examine, investigate, and discuss that record than if we were in that present moment. We can then speak and write new revelations we found from those recordings, continuing human capability. While cameras offer this iterative process, it also complicates shared language of viewers.

Framing of subjects by cameras acts much like the perspectives of our characters in *Rashomon*. By capturing fragments, cameras sculpt images that present a deliberate perspective. Cameras frame these images and channel embellishments vital to the perspective. Professional photographers are highly aware of framing effects, while the common viewer is mainly concerned with the subject in the frame. This fragmentation effect is what gives photographers and cinematographers control when developing the spectacle we witness. The spectacle can then resolve in the minds of viewers as a linguistic narrative.

Language in Cinema

Marshall McLuhan spoke in depth on the effects of new media, specifically cinema and television. He argued, "The message of the movie medium is that of transition from lineal connections to configurations." He continues with, "Specialized segments of attention have shifted to total field, and we can now say, 'The medium is the message' quite naturally. Before the electric speed and total field… [The] message, it seemed, was the 'content,' as people used to ask what a painting was about… But in the electric age this integral idea of structure and configuration has become so prevalent that educational theory has taken up the matter" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 4, 5). In our era, higher cognition concerns itself with "*where*" we find information and "*why*" we have it, rather than the lineal "*cause*" for the information to exist. The "*cause*" is the spectacle, and in film a sensational experience. McLuhan describes the spectacle as "figures" rising from the "background" of the medium. The message comes from the mass of working parts behind the spectacle that present it in specific ways. The "*where*" and "*why*" of the information are the medium, and effect the audience in a way that a message is received.

The spectacle cameras capture are a result of what Lev Manovich refers to as "transcoding." Manovich describes the two layers of new media as the "most substantial consequence of media's computerization" (2001, p. 63). Transcoding is the result of cultural influence and the computer influences working simultaneously to manifest the media we observe and use. The spectacle we observe is a representation of the total field. This representation works much like language does by offering icons and symbols, which we make sense of as spectators. While viewing the presentation, we use experience and personal references to attach meaning. We then assemble the meaning in a message by using language. This is evermore

apparent in a film or series of images. Metz and Taylor state, "It is impossible to not make a connection between images… To go from one image to two images is to go from image to language" (1991, p. 46).

The Assemblage of Modern Camera Technology

Consider the process of sharing modern images from the original creator.

Creator

Step 1	The camera operator physically frames the content of the image and digitally captures it in moving or still images.	cultural influence
Step 2	The camera operator may choose to edit the appearance by adding a filter, manipulating the exposure, cropping the image, or all of these options.	cultural and computer influence
Step 3	The result is then stored for private sharing or uploaded to the internet.	computer influence
Step 4	Images transmit through a gantlet of influences depending on the social media or mobile application used to upload the final product.	cultural and computer influence
Step 5	The image appears online, inviting viewing and responses to a community.	cultural influence

This assemblage of technology removes the images from their original context and entrenches them in a prescribed context of the online community. Through transcoding, the online community then finds meaning in the images, using the context of the immersed culture. Beyond the creator, this assemblage has the capacity to replicate images based on social interest. After we have shared our photos, another process begins for the receiver.

Receiver

Step 1	Interpret the image in the new assemblage.	cultural influence
Step 2	Share the image through a number of new platforms and technologies.	cultural and computer influence

The trading and sharing of images becomes a language of its own, relying on social and cultural references of popular principles and values. Rather than using words with a singular or chosen few meanings, this method packages concepts and meanings into images. By trading and sharing those images this language relies less on details and more on grand gestures.

Affordances and Constraints

As an extension of language, the ubiquity of cameras has contributed to written and oral dialogue. By the general population having camera-enabled communications, we can speak to the body of a person rather than to the character. As articulated by Katherine Hayles, without embodiment *reflexivity* tends to occur. She states, "Reflexivity is the movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through a changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates." When *reflexivity* is present in language, "Any formulation is sure to leave out some relevant instances" (Hayles, 1999, p. 8). Embodiment is vital to identifying a distinguishable consciousness. In the case of cameras, the body aids us in grasping perspective. By augmenting speech with cameras, we engage face-to-face interactions with communities. This offers video conferencing and skype interviews to liberate geographical employment location.

As technology has converged, cameras have become a key selling point in new technology. The information age is now constantly trafficking images online. YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki describes YouTube, "claims over 400 hours of content uploaded every single minute" (Brouwer, 2015). Due to the popular social response, we have seen the rise of viral videos, Instagram, and YouTube, which our culture has invested volumes of value. The abundance of cameras has offered new depths of survellience to uproot organized crime. Cameras have offered more transparency to keeping justice and accountability by recording

events (Guzik, 2016, P. 3). Cameras have offered platforms for otherwise unrecognized voices to construct scaffolding on which more sophisticated ideas can engage discourse (Kreimer, 2011, P. 380). Cameras have brought enjoyment to friends and family sharing fond memories, and stored records of our fond memories.

When cameras offer sensational experiences, they are deeply convincing that the spectacle is true. As described in "A Semiotics of the Cinema," audiences experience a "*This has been*" effect from photography and still images. However, moving images, gives the impression of "*There it is*." This instrument of perspective is extremely convincing to the spectator of the recorded images (Metz & Taylor, 1999, p. 5, 6). This effect leaves a lasting impression that the spectacle occurred true to the interpretation, and that the recording is evidence of the conclusion in reality.

However, it has become complicated to identify the true messages in videos and shared images. Like the characters of *Rashomon*, audiences speak the truth they have assembled from their own embellished perspectives. We have seen misinterpretations in online comments and forums that react to uploaded images. This phenomenon is even more apparent in biased communities and those with agendas trying to "*spin*" a story.

Relationship of Cameras and Language

It is natural to summarize a personal interpretation when witnessing a complex expression like photography and video. The information age strives to be direct, precise, and quick about the meaning behind emphasis. As culture encourages a direct response and technology speeds our response time, the resulting summary is less eloquent, offering less nuances to our personal expressions. While cameras offer a medium to forge new frontiers, the limitations of frame and transcoding simultaneously constrict efforts back to a fractional

representation of the total field. Having established that the camera expresses a representation of the message and language summarizes responses to recorded images, we start to see the relationship between camera technology and language.

A dangerous effect of camera technology has emerged in broadcast news and online comments when groups attach their own meaning outside of the images' original context. Whether the original context is unknown, or buried to replace it with a more favorable one, it is clear how mastering language around recorded images has the power to summarize the message delivered.

Imagery Leading Language: The Nathan Phillips Incident

While simple on a small scale, it may be harder to identify logical errors when enterprise media engage in this new assemblage of camera technology. A recent event proved the complex nature of navigating the ubiquity of cameras, and the language elicited in various communities. What started as a short video uploaded to social media quickly became a viral sensation of scrutiny and wrongful demonization.

January 18th, 2019, a mob of high school boys touting MAGA hats is recorded in confrontation with a Native American elder, Nathan Phillips. The video frames the tension between a disrespectful high school mob and a vulnerable Native American. A cheery boy, Nick Sandmann, stands face to face with a peacefully singing Mr. Phillips as the circling crowd of boys watches in amusement. The emergence of this video came from Reddit and spread to major media outlets due to the abundance of internet discussion. Due to the "national backdrop of political tension," the original video framed a scene of harassment by conservative culture (Mervosh & Rueb, 2019). This triggered backlash comments on the video, by liberal culture.

Later, more videos emerged to reveal events leading up to and surrounding the original video. These videos included another group berating and instigating the high school boys to chant and react. Following video shows Mr. Phillips approaching the scene, apparently in an attempt to diffuse tensions. The climactic moment spawning the original video in frame was but an awkward fragment when Phillips and Sandmann stood fixed in dismay.

This new perspective triggered conservative culture to lash out against the public ridicule of Phillips. Media outlets rewrote the narrative of events. Interviews with Sandmann surfaced revealing the death threats he received over the incident. Frame and perspective truly mattered in this complex communication technology.

Implications

After witnessing how complications in the era of ubiquitous cameras can lead to damaging effects of mob mentality, it is clear that when engaging in this modern community, we must broaden our perspective to include multiple narratives. By doing so, we direct our language to the source of the effect that the medium has caused. This embraces a fuller, more informed, dialogue that breaks away from the limitations of cameras, returning to human capabilities.

By understanding that cameras have limitations of perspective and that the message is an effect of the medium, we can exercise sharper responses to camera culture. We can navigate the effects that videos and images have on us as we interact with modern society, and more wisely choose the significant details of our summaries and responses. This new configuration steers us away from damaging reflexes and misinterpretations that demystify the ubiquity of cameras.

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