

## **The ontological value of the digital format: the role of video cameras for amateur video production**

Andrei PETREA

PhD Student

“I. L. Caragiale” National University of Drama and Film, București  
ROMANIA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In his book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan quotes part of David Sarnoff's speech at the University of Notre Dame: “The products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value”<sup>2</sup>. This quote can be extended to discuss the influence of the medium in visual arts, especially cinema and its related products. The rapid technological pace of cinema only confirms the ideal pursued by image creators since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that of faithfully reproducing reality. Digital (ultra) High-Definition cinema achieves this ideal, but brings along an almost aseptic type of the image. The ontological signs of the medium have completely disappeared along with the use of digital sensors. In the case of analogue film, these signs could be materialized in stylistic intentions (e.g., the granularity of the negative, the stop-camera motion effect, the asynchronous shutter). The financial aspect and the unavailability of laboratories for processing photosensitive material make the adoption of the analogue medium in modern productions increasingly difficult. The solution proposed brings to attention the standard-definition video format (e.g. DV/miniDV, digital camcorder). Both the limitations of the CCD sensor and the constructive features of these cameras intended for amateurs can be turned into visual effects. The poor resolution, chromatic aberrations or imprecision of the automatic focusing system (i.e. uto-focus hunting) have even given rise to specific cinematic movements such as the *found-footage* genre. In recent years, these cameras have become popular once again among the younger Y/Z generations. Thus, media products such as music videos, advertisements or video essays nowadays contain material recorded with such devices, considered by most to be obsolete. This seemingly amateurish effect appears more and more often in media products shared online and triggers melancholy among the aforementioned demographic.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrei Petrea is a Romanian director of photography based in Bucharest. He has a Bachelor's and a Master's degree from the Film Image Department of UNATC „I. L. Caragiale” in Bucharest. He is currently a PhD student in cinematography and media, and his thesis follows the transfers and visual influences between cinema and video games, andrei.petrea@unatc.ro.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall McLuhan (1994), *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, p. 11.

## 1. Introduction

As a director of photography, I believe that staying up to date with the technical aspects of this craft, especially with the aesthetic trends that have emerged over time in cinema or other related audio-visual products is part of being a filmmaker. Lately, we encounter a recurring tendency in certain commercial projects: directors or producers suggest using old video cameras intended for amateur audiences (i.e. the camcorder) to be integrated as a counterpoint to the material filmed using modern digital cameras. We also learn from professionals in film post-production that it has become an increasingly common practice to simulate the aesthetics of such cameras in the process of colorization of various audio-visual products (i.e., music videos, commercials).

The influence of the medium on visual products is a subject treated by a considerable number of theorists in the field of film studies. For more than twenty years, cinematographers have been debating the comparison between the digital image and the film negative. Although the dispute is slowly starting to die out, these days we are witnessing a phenomenon that counterpoints several digital formats. Certainly, the film negative and the whole analogue working process is more valuable from an ontological point of view, keeping a tangible connection with the environment. In this case, the transfer takes place through a mechanical device that captures light on a photosensitive surface, then the magic of the chemical process reveals the final image. This process depends on a significant number of variables that can be stylistically exploited to emphasize the presence of the medium in a film: the granularity of the negative and how it reacts differently in various lighting conditions, the way the negative veil is used as a form of expression or the asynchronous shutter. All these technical aspects can be considered flaws, but some directors and cinematographers had the courage to use them in favor of their concept. Such examples can be found even in Romanian cinema – *O lacrimă de fată* (*A girl's tear*, 1980, dir. Iosif Demian, DoP Iosif Demian & Constantin Chelba).

The digital image emerged as a culmination of the desire to obtain as faithful a rendition of reality as possible. Being a process dependent on the capabilities of modern expertise, digital image technology advanced year by year and finally reached the perfection of the (Ultra) High Definition standards. But does this perfection preserve the expressiveness of the medium?

Precisely to answer this question, we suggest to bring back to light the Standard-Definition format produced by camcorders intended for amateur video production. The purpose of this article is not to assert the superiority of this format in relation to new recording technologies, but rather to offer an ontologically valuable alternative for certain directorial concepts. The proposal becomes all the more topical in the context of an increased popularity of such formats among the younger generations (i.e. the digicam aesthetic trend). Thus,

following an analysis of how this medium has been and is being used in the recent history of audio-visual products, we decided to divide the discussion into three parts: Simulacrum, Figurative and Nostalgic. For each parts we will refer to a relevant film or media product.

## 2. Simulacrum

In 2001, Lev Manovich discussed the use of cameras intended for amateur users in his work *From DV Realism to a Universal Recording Machine*<sup>3</sup>. In this article, he states that although the realism generated by the video format can be considered a successor to the *cinéma vérité* movement, filmmakers who use such capture media do not stop at simply recording reality. Some of these films follow a complex narrative style and use professional actors who follow concrete directorial guidance. However, we consider it necessary to focus our attention also on how the medium itself manages to induce the illusion of reality among the audience. A pertinent example is the film *The Blairwitch Project* (1999, dir. Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez, DoP Neal Fredericks). The premise of the film is to show real events that took place in 1994. Even though it is known by most as a film belonging to the *horror* genre, its documentary value is supported by the two perspectives developed in parallel: the objective perspective stylistically outlined by the 16mm black and white analogue format and the subjective perspective of the making-of camera, in the Hi-8 video format. The film's opening-credits explain this premise: "in October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland, while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found"<sup>4</sup>.

In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard defines four successive phases of the image: it is the reflection of a deep reality; it masks and distorts a deep reality; it masks the absence of a deep reality; it has no relation to any kind of reality; it is its own pure simulacrum.<sup>5</sup> In *The Blairwitch Project*, the use of the video camera places the film on the border between simulacrum and dissimulation.

The *ciné vérité* feeling Manovich mentioned comes from the closeness of the camera to the subject, from the relationship built between the operator and the actor. The making-of camera closely accompanies the three students, sometimes giving the impression that a fourth character is present. But even the

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<sup>3</sup> Lev Manovich (2001), *From DV Realism to a Universal Recording Machine*, [http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/031-reality-media/28\\_article\\_2001.pdf](http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/031-reality-media/28_article_2001.pdf), viewed on 9.11.2023.

<sup>4</sup> Opening credits of *The Blairwitch Project* :  
*In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland, while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found.*

<sup>5</sup> Jean Baudrillard (2008), *Simulacre și Simulare* [Simulacra and Simulation], Idea Design & Print, Cluj-Napoca, p. 9.

content evoked by the video format supports the intimate nature of the images produced by it. In the opening sequences of the film, we see how the Hi-8 camera is used to describe preparations prior to the trip of the three; personal footage of each character is shown. Due to this association of content with form, in the unfolding of the film the viewer regards the material filmed by video camera as a personal intervention, especially sincere regarding the events described.

Stylistically, the making-of camera operator does not follow any compositional norms: the handheld shots are chaotic and most frames place the subject in the center. Returning to the discussion of form, technical flaws in the video format are consciously used to outline a powerful counterpoint to the objective images produced using the 16mm format. This counterpoint is actually a simulacrum of an immediate, but above all unrepeatable reality, established by a convention suggested at the beginning of the film. Beyond the amateurish way in which the operator relates to the camera in terms of composition and camera movements, the poor resolution and chromatic aberrations of the video format are traits of the medium that build the veracity of an immediate reality. Clarity is perhaps one of the most eloquent technical features supporting the simulacrum value of the video format in *The Blairwitch Project*. In professional fiction film, any error in the process of developing clarity makes the filmed material to be considered technical waste. In the case of the film discussed, there are numerous errors in sharpening. They come either from the imprecision of the autofocus system (i.e., auto-focus hunting) or due to the optical limitations of the camera lens used (e.g., close-up or detail-plan shots obtained by approaching the camera past the clearance limit). Both situations occur accidentally due to the limitations of the camera system, but in this case, they serve the concept. The fact that such technically flawed sequences were included in the final montage only demonstrates the desire to suggest to the audience that the material viewed represents an unrepeatable reality.

The response of the audience was as expected. *The Blairwitch Project* had one of the most developed marketing campaigns in recent film history. The film was promoted mainly by using a launch website featuring fake police reports revealing the three missing students. During screenings, producers handed out flyers with messages meant to treat the disappearance of the characters in the film as real, and the film's IMDb page presented the protagonists as dead or missing.

Given the arguments made, we consider *The Blairwitch Project* a persuasive example showing how the medium itself can tell a story, stylistically capitalizing on its ontological signs.

### 3. Figurative

The poor resolution of the Standard-Definition system can sometimes be used to support an abstract stylistic approach. In this regard, we consider Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami's recent observational films to be relevant.

*Five Dedicated to Ozu* (2003, dir. Abbas Kiarostami, DoP. Abbas Kiarostami) is an observational film of the Iranian director, consisting of five distinct frame sequences. The compositional language of the film can be described by the immobility of the camera, without any corrections of the composition. We consider *Five* a film that is either appreciated for its invitation to introspection or blamed for the boredom it provokes. The discussion we initiate addresses none of these views, but rather wishes to consider the figurative use of the Standard-Definition format.

The poor resolution and chromatic aberrations of the DV format lead to an abstraction of lines and shapes in the frame. I chose precisely this film directed by Kiarostami, because of the Iranian director's experience with fine arts and graphic design. As a graduate of the University of Arts in Tehran, his first forays into the art world took place as a graphic designer in advertising. *Five* had a screening at the National Museum of Asian Art in Washington, USA. This manner of screening a film inside a museum supports the *tableau vivant* value of this observational film.

The deliberate abstraction and stylization achieved by poor definition in an era where the high-resolution digital image doesn't miss even the finest details is reminiscent of how the impressionist movement responded to the perfection brought by photography. The high-definition digital format is aseptic: it offers little to interpret. Both the way lines and shapes are defined and the generous latitude of modern digital sensors make the digital image a rather unmysterious representation. In this sense, Abbas Kiarostami's vivid paintings also gain figurative value by choosing the Standard Definition video format, thus adding another layer to the already ambiguous narrative.

### 4. Nostalgic

More than twenty years ago, when the Hollywood industry was experimenting with equipment intended for amateurs to satisfy certain aesthetic reasons, the youth of today were filmed by their families with the same equipment, with the intent of creating a personal archive. Most of today's youth (i.e. people in their 20s and 30s) associate the aesthetic features of these Standard-Definition cameras with childhood images. For this age group, such images characterized by the aforementioned technical deficiencies, whether we are

talking about photos or video, induce nostalgia. A study<sup>6</sup> conducted by the University of Southampton is relevant to our topic. It reveals details about the triggering mechanism of nostalgia.

The most frequent subjects of nostalgia turned out to be people we feel close to (family, friends, colleagues), special events (birthdays, graduations) and animals. The main trigger of this feeling is negative affect, along with various sensory impulses. Although most of these impulses were described as belonging to the olfactory, auditory and gustatory senses, sight is also very present in our lives and deserves a separate discussion.

Most of our childhood memories go back to when we were about three years old, at the earliest. Certain medical scholars claim that the human brain does not retain detailed memories until the age of 7. This is why most adults rely on different media devices to record different moments from the past. These media items range from analogue photos and VHS tapes to digital photos and videos. Today's youth are part of the generation whose visual memories are mostly digital images (i.e., captured using the first-generation digital cameras and video cameras). Their idea of the childhood self is a not-so-well-defined portrait, sometimes even blurry, with various strange colour effects, on an image with the date printed in the corner. This type of media product has its own stamp and depicts personal moments with a certain degree of intimacy involving interactions with family, friends and other loved ones.

Today's music industry has been heavily influenced by the pop music of the late '80s and early '90s, and its visual identity is properly characterized. But the trend of music videos incorporating footage shot using amateur cameras began long before the 2020s. Perhaps one of the most relevant examples of childhood nostalgia is the video for Ed Sheeran's song *Photograph*. It consists of family video diaries of the British artist, describing moments that start from a playful childhood to becoming one of the most appreciated musicians in the world. While the early part of his life is represented by actual family footage recorded by Ed's father, the period depicting his rise to worldwide popularity (e.g., shows or rehearsals) continues to be recorded with similar equipment. This was decided so as to maintain the sense of intimacy of the overall message, despite the technological advancement that has come with the passage of time. The music video is a pure example of how today's young adults are used to visualizing their childhood memories through the lens of the video camera.

Another example is Bruno Mars' song *Treasure*. The song's video is the result of working with a director this time, and its visual style started a general

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<sup>6</sup> Clay Routledge *et. al.* (2006), *Nostalgia: Content, Triggers, Functions*, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 91, no. 5, 975-993, DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.91.5.975.

trend in the music industry (see today's visual identity of artists like Dua Lipa or The Weeknd). Although we don't exactly know if the overall look is achieved by the video camera format or by a post-production process, the image format along with the poor resolution and even the way the highlights are rendered throughout the video are only a few examples that show the decision to emulate the Pop-Funk culture of the early '80s.

But both music videos were released in the early 2010s. Why has this visual style exploded just now among the young population? Returning to the trigger mechanism of nostalgia, negative affect seems to be one of its most common causes. Nostalgia can become a defense mechanism to deal with stressful times in our lives. The last three years have been marked by a global pandemic that has kept the entire world indoors or on lockdown. This was a crucial time for nostalgia to set in, as most people were separated from their loved ones. So, they finally found time to search through their photo/video archives and look back in time. The famous online platform TikTok also gained popularity around that time and definitely left its mark on the retro digital camera trend. The TikTok algorithm began to increase the popularity of videos that recreated the digital aesthetic of the 2000s. Now, a few years after the COVID pandemic, teenagers create their regular content on social media using this type of device; they even started filming more of their daily life using these dedicated cameras instead of their mobile phone. People have now discovered that these types of dedicated devices are easier to use, more convenient (ie, thanks to the generous zoom lens, battery life and pocket size), and most importantly, they have a voice of their own. Their resolution is far from perfect, but it is different from the common, objective point of view of any high-resolution camera.

To conclude, this article can be treated rather as an invitation for professionals in the audio-visual field but also for young amateur enthusiasts not to forget a format that may be technically outdated, but with its own ontological imprint. We find it relevant to conclude with General Sarnoff's words quoted by Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*: "the products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Marshall McLuhan(1994), *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, p. 11.

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