

ON ON-LOOKING

by Marialaura Ghidini

In his work *Observer/Observed and other works of video Semiology*, Takahiko Iimura tackles phenomenology of perception by analysing video, or more precisely, the science of film. The camera, the monitor, the space and time between them are the devices, and physically present entities, at stake in his 'scientific video experiments', in that it is via them, and because of them, that reality is framed, and therefore *presented as it is*.

Iimura conducts his investigation by stripping the act of filming down to the essentiality of the apparatuses that enable the capture of what surrounds us; highlighting the workings of the act of (filmic) observation in a highly analytical, and structuralist, manner. It is a triumph of the eye, or more precisely, of the camera lenses and of the cathode ray tubes of TV monitors.

Zooming out from Iimura's analytical perspective, how does one observe?

Observation is an act, or rather, a process through which any information is filtered by the senses - sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. And as soon as a piece of information is received it is re-processed by the brain according to one's understanding, belief system, or existing knowledge.

In my text *On Superposition*, I placed emphasis on the act of observing as 'producing evidence of the state of the observed object', stressing the correlation between the position of an object and the way it is looked on by the observer.

What influences the way in which the observer observes the observed? Is it just the respective positioning of the subject and the object, and the subject's senses?

First of all, there are different modes of observations.

In the case of Iimura, whose position is that of an onlooker - the one who observes but does not take part in the action, records but is hidden, analyses but is detached -, observation is carried out by applying a scientific method. The presence of any object external to the act of filming is erased, literally focusing on the interaction between that which shoots, that which is shot and that which displays.

It is a scientific observation, during which a phenomenon is examined and a theory formulated via hypotheses and, above all, predicting, as well as testing and showing, its logical consequences. The ultimate aim is to produce the sought evidence in the most neutral environment possible - skirting what could set in motion one's impressions, presuppositions and other contingencies. This neutrality seeks to propose a *present as it is*, or better, a *condition (or phenomenon) as it is*.

However, the mediums used (or devices, in the case of 'real' science) play a fundamental role, because they directly affect the "investigators"' approach to observing, shaping the form, as well as the state, of that which is observable.

And here I am back to a rather trite perplexity.

If the medium affects the way one observes, it also affects the position of the object (as well as its state) and, in the same way, the position of the observer itself.

This interdependence is then enriched by the fact that each medium has a specific language and codified rules - similar to grammar. A specificity, that one, that is further complicated by the modifications that language and rules undergo over time. This modification might be described as an expansion, which in the case of film and video history has been generated by the huge impact of Hollywood, TV series, serials and sequels; as well as technology, Youtube, Vimeo, or Imovie to name a few.

Where does neutrality lie in the everyday experience, if idiosyncrasy and pre-acquired knowledge are to be found in any act of observation?

I will discuss this by referring to another video, which documents a live sound performance.

The video in question¹ features William Shatner performing Elton John's *The Rocket Man* at the 5th Science Fiction Film Awards (USA, 1978) and shows a superimposed and tripartite Shatner, singing the same song while posing in three different manners at the same time as the video goes on. Easy. Through what is now a widespread editing effect, viewers' presuppositions and given knowledge were shattered by extending the properties of the medium video as it was proposed on TV in 1978. Straightforward. This video is also an elementary example of the impact that a medium has on the act of observation, as well as on the definition of the position of the *observed*. Likewise, it is a case in point of how one's pre-acquired knowledge influences the perception of that which is observed. In fact the image of a tripartite Shatner would not shake the minds of any film festival attendee or watcher these days.

So what does framing reality is, and presenting it *as it is* mean?

Empirical observation rules over the logic and scientific one; viewing habits are deeply rooted in, and dependent on, the medium through which the act of observation occurs. Additionally, as Iimura's work showed us as early as 1976, the system of observation generated by a medium, besides positioning and rational processing, can in turn be influenced by the way time and space are twisted together during the functioning; and such latter condition has been very much extended by the workings of the daily routine of contemporary network society.

How the presuppositions connected to the act of observation take place in the mind of what Peter Weibel defines as the "post-media contemporary viewer"²; the one who already has a library of visual (and I would add sensorial) experiences, the one that lives in a time where medium specificity does not exist anymore because there is no dominance of a specific medium as "all of the different media influence and determine each other"?

And how is this challenged not by suggesting a logical and scientific approach to the present, but by creating a mode of observation directly resulting from the distinctive "worlds" brought forth by the intrinsic potentials of this mixing? What happens when forms of observation are directly connected to the time of the observers, becoming coiled forms


1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NN3MGN899yE>

2 Peter Weibel, *Synthetic Times*; <http://mediartchina.org/essays/Weibel.pdf>

and making the one who looks part of what is happening?

End. This editorial finishes here, on a series of questions as I feel that neither the convolution of positions and combinations described nor what might be next can be undone here.

On On-looking is the editorial of the online exhibition *On-looking* featuring artworks by Alexandra Ferreira & Bettina Wind, Emma Hart, Irini Karayannopoulou, Radiomentale, David Rule, Annalisa Sonzogni, Davide Tidoni and Andrew Venell + guest blogger Tamarin Norwood; <http://or-bits.com/onlooking.php>

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