Rimediazioni

Immagini interattive

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Remediating the presence. First-person shots and post cinema subjectivity

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1. Introduction

In this paper[1], I consider a specific audio-visual technique that is widespread within the contemporary media landscape. I call it the "first-person shot". The first-person shot appears on different occasions throughout different media, from combat videos recorded with helmet cams and distributed via Internet to video-surveillance footage re-used in art installations, and from video clips of live events taken with video cell phones and broadcasted by television news to first-person video games, to cite just a few examples.

The core of my paper will be devoted to reconstruct the first-person shot's technological and stylistic genealogy. I argue that, although firmly a part of contemporary cinema, it constitutes a radically intermedial and post-cinematographic[2] technique, since it stems from a network of "remediations" and "deep-remixes" involving different media agencies and players – from mainstream cinema to independent television and video producers, from the video-game industry to military and surveillance uses of audiovisuals.

In my conclusions, I'll rapidly sketch two questions related to the first-person shot. First, I ask whether the first-person shot should or

[1] Previous version of this paper have been discussed with many friends and colleagues. I am particularly grateful to Gianfranco Bettetini, Francesco Casetti, Elena Dagrada, Miriam De Rosa, Adriano D'Aloia, Roberto de Gaetano, Vinzenz Hediger, Frank Kessler, Charo Lacalle and Antonio Somaini for their useful hints.

[2] See PETHÖ, ed., 2012; CASETTI 2015.

not be considered not just as an audio-visual technique but also as a well-defined semiotic figure. My answer will be positive; moreover, I argue that a formal assessment of the first-person shot entails a new systematization of point-of-view issue within the semiotics of audiovisual media.

The second question concerns the cultural foundation of the first-person shot. In this regard, I'll propose to consider it as a kind of "symbolic form", implying a specific conception of the subject as a hybrid, dynamical and relational entity – an idea of subject and sub-jectivity chiming with contemporary conceptions of phenomenologi-cal neuroscience.

2. Towards a genealogy of the first-person shot

The first-person shot derives from six major technological and stylistic innovations that have affected the media landscape since the beginning of the Eighties. The first is the introduction of the *Steadicam,* brought to market in 1975 but used extensively from the early Eighties. Many film directors have used Steadicams to reinvent the classical tracking shot[3]. Moreover, various new television series in the nineties made extensive use of Steadicams, which proved the ideal means for passing smoothly through confined spaces, such as police-station rooms and hospital corridors. Steadicam implies a "subjective" cam-era gaze: in other words, it expresses a perceptive and active grasp of reality and therefore a living, lived, ongoing process of experience, made by an embodied and embedded subject[4].

[3] Steadicam was used for the first time in *Bound for Glory* (Al Ashby, USA, 1976). Other notable films using Steadicams include *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, USA / GB, 1980), *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 1995), *La mort en direct* (Deathwatch, Bertrand Tavernier, Fr. / West Ger. / UK, 1980), *Snake Eyes* (Brian De Palma, USA, 1998), *The Russian Ark* (Alexander Sokurov, Russia / Germany, 2002) and *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, USA, 2003).

[4] «What is unique about the Steadicam as a tool for reproducing our vision is the continual balancing that gives it the same stability as our head on our body, for which we can be likened to a good tripod with a stable and movable "pan head". […] The most important characteristic of the Steadicam is the quality of movement it gives: movement which is not perceived through its defects, but rather through its perfection […]» FERRARA 2001, pp. 19-20; 73. See also GEUENS 1993-1994, pp. 8-17.

A second innovation is the introduction of *portable digital cameras* at the start of the Nineties. On the one hand, digital cameras achieved an image quality close to that of movie equipment; on the other, their lightness allowed operators to rediscover hand-held camera techniques typical of militant cinema, combat film or anthropological movies[5]. These processes were intensively exploited in news reports and video documentaries; at the same time, they became appreciated in *docu-drama* or *mockumentary* productions, before being used in both independent and mainstream feature films. Consequently, many expressive forms evincing the camera operator's active presence within the framed world (shaky cameras, "dirty" image quality, over and under-exposures, etc.) are currently widespread in documentaries and protest film, television series[6], action and war movies[7], reality-TV shows, viral web videos, horror movies purporting to be assembled from found footage materials that survived the operator's death[8], etc.

A third innovation is the introduction of *miniaturized digital cameras*, such as helmet cameras (invented in 1987 by Mark Schulze, a director of photography from San Diego, to shoot motorcycle races), lipstick cameras, combat cameras mounted on weapons, video cameras integrated into cellular telephones, personal-computer webcams, and so on. Once again, these devices facilitate strong and direct involvement of the subject within the actions that are represented. Videos produced by this type of micro-camera are now widespread, especially throughout the web: think, for example, of videos produced dur-

[5] «With the rise of the fluid, global marketplace during the years in between [the Sixties, with the handly shaky camera used and theorized by Jonas Mechas, and the Nineties, with the digital camera used and theorized by Lars von Trier] the shaky camera has transformed from a technique to a way of seeing the world. And the digital code itself, weightless information transmitted through rewires, cables and wireless nodes, is as free-floating as the camera». See ROMBES 2009, p. 105; HESSELBERT 2014, pp. 51-80.

[6] Such as *Homicide,* created by Paul Attanasio, 1993-1999; Lars von Trier's *Riget*, 1994-1995; *The Shield* by Shawn Ryan since 2002, and many others.

[7] See *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, USA, 1998), *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, USA, 2001), *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2008), etc.

[8] Recall *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, USA, 1999), *Rec* and *Rec II* (Jaume Balaguero and Paco Plaza, Sp., 2007 and 2009), *The Diary of the Dead* (George A. Romero, USA, 2007), *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, USA, 2007) and sequels, *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, USA, 2008), etc. Consider also the television series inspired by the same aesthetic criteria, such as *The River* (Michael R. Perry and Oren Peli, USA, 2012).

ing military combat; their homemade parodies or remakes; car or motorcycle accidents recorded from the victims' perspective; the video genre of "urban explorations"; everyday or historical events captured "live" via cell phone[9] or, more recently, by Google Glass and other wearable devices[10].

The fourth area of technological innovation that has influenced the establishment of the first-person shot is *surveillance technology*. Since the late Nineties, digital technology has helped expand the market for CCTV (Closed-Circuit Television), thanks to three factors: sensors of greater sensitivity; the possibility of controlling multiple cameras simultaneously; and significant price reductions[11]. These cameras (pinhole video cameras, miniature still cameras, spy cameras, etc.) were easy to connect to digital communication networks, thus enabling remote video surveillance of public and private spaces. As a result, video-monitoring spread rapidly, while watching video-surveillance footage became a common practice, especially on desktop computers and portable devices, both for practical purposes and for pure entertainment[12]. Surveillance cameras manifest the presence of the filmic equipment within the framed world, whereas the opportunity for the watcher to re-frame the shot (with zooms and pans) highlights the active nature of the perceptual practices involved.

The fifth technological innovation indirectly responsible for the raise of the first-person shot, consists in researches on *Virtual Reality* (VR). If we take VR in its more technical sense[13], we can place its birth in the early Eighties. In the course of the decade, VR embodied

[9] On this phenomenon, see AMBROSINI, MAINA, MARCHESCHI 2009; ODIN, ed., 2010.

[10] On Google Glass as "de-localized eye" and "prosthesis of an embodied gaze" see MONTANI 2014.

[11] See PETERSEN 2012; FINN 2012; BAUMAN & LYON 2013; ZIMMER 2015.

[12] For example, many apps for iPhone and iPad (such as Live Cams by Eggman Technologies) allow users to watch thousands of public or private surveillance-camera clips with their mobile devices.

[13] «Virtual reality is a scientific and technical domain that uses computer science (1) and behavioural interfaces (2) to simulate in a virtual world (3) the behavior of 3D entities, which interact in real time (4) with each other and with one or more users in pseudo-natural immersion (5) via sensorimotor channels […] The purpose of virtual reality is to make possible a sensorimotor and cognitive activity for a person (or persons) in a digitally created artificial world, which can be imaginary, symbolic or a simulation of certain aspects of the real world» (FUCHS & GUITTON 2011, pp. 6 and 8).

hopes and utopias related to digital technologies developments; for this reason, it was widely represented within novels[14] and films[15], as well as discussed in many passionate theoretical debates[16]. During the Nineties, the advent of the World Wide Web gradually overshadowed its social visibility; nevertheless, some results of VR technology fueled video games technical innovations (see below), were used in many art installations, and have been developed in practical fields, such as the military industry. The recent introduction of Oculus Rift goggles signals a renewed interest for update applications of VR technology. It is relevant to point out that the debate on VR discussed in depth whether it should be considered a subjective experience of disembodiment or rather of re-embodiment[17]. In my opinion the question is misplaced, since VR actually represents a first-person experience of *simulated embodiment*, enacted by a hybrid entity at the same time natural and artificial[18].

The sixth and last (but not least, as we'll see) innovation responsible for the emergence of the first-person shot is the development of *video games that are playable in first person* with sufficient speed, fluidity and realism[19]. Within the video-game domain, the term "first-person shot" refers to the player's ability to perform the actions designed in the game from the visual and aural perspective of a specific character, whose body is not usually entirely visible and which is

[14] See for instance *Neuromancer* (William Gibson, 1984) and more generally the "cyberpunk" stream within the sci-fi literature. See CHAN 2014.

[15] Consider for instance *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, Usa, 1982), *Brainstorm* (Douglas Trumbull, Usa, 1983), *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoven, Usa, 1990, remade by Len Wiseman, Usa, 2012), *The Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, Uk-Usa_Japan, 1992), *Disclosure* (Barry Levinson, Usa, 1994), *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, Usa, 1995), *Johnny Mnemonic* (Robert Longo, Usa, 1995), *EXistenZ* (David Cronemberg, Canada-Uk, 1999), *Tron: Legacy* (Joseph Kosinski, Usa, 2010), etc.

[16] RHEINGOLD 1991; WOOLLEY 1993; HEIM 1993; FEATHERSTONE & BURROWS, eds., 1995; BIOCCA & LEVY, eds., 1995.

[17] HILLIS 1999; CRANG, CRANG, MAY, eds., 1999; HANSEN 2004; DYSON 2009; BRYANT, POLLOCK, eds., 2010.

[18] See DIODATO 2012.

[19] BRICE & RUTTER 2002; MORRIS 2002; TAYLOR 2003; REHAC 2008; NITSCHE 2009; HERLANDER 2009; WAGGONER 2009; VOORHEES, CALL, WHITLOCK 2012. On the relationships between video games and new media, see the influential anthology WARDRIP-FRUIN & HARRIGAN, eds., 2004. For a comparison between video games, first-person shots and analogous forms of subjective shot in early cinema, see MCMAHAN 2006.

commonly called an "avatar". Three video-game genres normally use this technique: the *shooters*, the *vehicle simulators* (*flying planes, driving tanks, racing cars*), and some *graphic adventure games.* These genres first arose in the Seventies with games like *Maze War* (1973) and *Spasim* (1974); the first-person-shot video games became popular in the Nineties thanks to *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and its direct successor *Doom*[20]. *Doom*'s incredible success opened the way for products such as *Duke Nukem 3D* (1996), *Quake* (1996) and *Half Life* (1998). At the same time, the first-person viewpoint was adopted for many *point-and-click graphic adventure games,* in particular for the popular series opened by *Myst* (Cyan / Broderbund Software, 1993, followed in subsequent years by *Riven* and *Myst III: Exile*). Since the late Nineties, first-person video games have been evolving in two directions: they became more realistic, while video-game narrative designers cross-pollinated shooters, adventure games and drive simulators. As a result, today we find a new generation of war games such as the *Medal of Honor* series (Dreamworks / Electronic Arts, since 1999), *Call of Duty* (Activision / Infinity Ward, since 2003), *Crisis* (since 2007), and a new kind of driver and racing simulator, such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series (Zachary Jones & Dave Clarke, since 1997).

3. The first-person shot as a case of post-cinematographic deep remediation

Crucial to my argument is that the first-person shot does not derive from a simple juxtaposition or superimposition of stylistic solutions resulting from the five areas of technological innovation highlighted above. Rather, it stems from a network of exchanges and loans involving different media agencies and actors – from mainstream cinema to independent television and video producers, from the video-game industry to the art world, from software programmers to "prosumers" and their grassroots activities.

[20] For many interesting observations on *Doom*'s first-person shot, see MORRIS & BITTANTI, eds., 2005.

More precisely, we can distinguish three levels of hybridization. At a first level, we find cross exchanges between *technical devices for the production of moving images*. At this level there are three main drivers of development, variously connected and superimposed: a drive to the *mobilization* of the camera (steadicam, portable cameras, helmet cameras, etc.), a second one to the *miniaturization* of the camera (pinhole cameras, surveillance cameras), and a third one to the *virtualization* of the camera (virtual reality, video games).

The second level concerns the *textual formats*: whole films, particular sequences, video clips, television programs, audiovisual flows (as in the case of surveillance video shots, etc.). The third level refers to the *forms of distribution and dispositives of consumption* of textual format: cinema, television, web, specialized equipment (such as in the case of flight simulators, control of the multiscreen video cameras, etc.)

In order to understand the emergence of the first-person shot, we must considered that the different agencies acting at the three levels, have been progressively reproducing, simulating, transforming and hybridizing the technological, stylistic and practical solutions emerging at each level. The first-person-shot technique emerges precisely from this complex process of molding, which involves the entire network of audio-visual media.

We can conceptualize this phenomenon by posing it at the intersection of two notions. The first one is the well-known idea of Bolter and Grusin's remediation, especially considered as a way of re-shaping the entire media system[21]. The second one is the concept of "remix" (Dusi & Spaziante 2006; Dusi 2014) and, more precisely, Manovich's recent idea of "deep remixability", intended as a remix «not only [of] the content of different media types, but also [of] their fundamental techniques, working methods, and ways of representation and expression»

[21] «[…] at this extended historical moment, all current media function as remediators and that remediation offer us a means of interpreting the work of earlier media as well. Our culture conceives of each medium or constellation of media as it responds to, redeploys, competes with, and reforms other media» (BOLTER & GRUSIN 1999, p. 55). Moreover, the first-person shot is a perfect example of the dialectic between de-mediation (immediacy) and hypermediation, following Bolter and Grusin's core argument.

(Manovich 2013: 46). To sum up, we can consider the first-person shot as a case of *deep remediation.*

By way of illustration, I offer just a few examples of this kind of deep remediation. Firstly, the use of the Steadicam in *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 1995) or *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, USA, 2003) was inspired by *first-person-shot* video games; similarly, many online videos shot with helmet cams are actually parodies of contemporary video games. Conversely, various video games reproduce hand-held camera effects, e.g. when the "camera" follows the character in a war-action sequence or a football match. Moreover, CCTV and video-surveillance devices have been re-used in many artistic video installations[22], in television information, *docu-fiction*, and TV crime series[23], and they have become a critical feature of reality-TV shows. Surveillance shootings have been simulated in many feature films, such as *Raising Cain* (Brian De Palma, USA, 1992), *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott, USA, 1992), and *Caché* (Michael Haneke, France / Austria / Germany / Italy, 2005). Finally, we can find movies that reincorporate and recombine almost all the technological tools mentioned above: a clear example is *Redacted* (Brian De Palma, USA, 2007).

The main conclusion we can draw from this reconstruction is that the first-person shot should be considered a radically *intermedial* and *post cinematographic* stylistic solution. From this perspective, we can notice one of the differences between the first-person shot and the point of view shot (or subjective shot): while the latter was born within the boundaries of cinematographic (and then televisual) moving image, the first sprang from a network of "deep remixes" involving old e new media.

4. The first-person shot as a semiotic figure

I intend to conclude my paper by outlining two issues.

[22] LEVIN, FROHNE, WEIBEL 2002; SOMAINI 2010; PHILLIPS, ed., 2010; ALBUQUERQUE 2014. See also the overviews by KAMMERER 2012; LEFAIT 2013.

[23] DOYLE 2003. See also GARRETT 2015.

First, I argue that the first-person shot should be considered not just a "technical and / or stylistic solution", but rather a "semiotic figure" formally defined. More particularly, two features define the first-person shot as a semiotic figure. First, the instance responsible for the perceptual constitution of the diegetic world is exhibited as bodily situated within the world itself and as something or someone embedded in a network of living relations with subjects and objects that inhabit this very world. We can say that the first-person shot expresses an intentional stance of the subject of perception and that, in some cases, this intentionality is reciprocated by the intended subjects and objects of the diegetic world: indeed, both one-way and two-way relations can be expressed. The second feature defining the first-person shot as a semiotic figure is the hybrid nature of the instance responsible for the perceptual constitution of the diegetic world; namely, it ranges between a "subjectual" and "natural" pole characterized by human nature and an "objectual" and "artificial" one endowed with a mechanical nature, constantly redefining and negotiating its nature between these two poles. Both these features represents marked, formal differences between the first-person shot and the "classic" point-of-view shot. On this basis, the advent of the first-person shot push to a radical re-definition of the point of view system of audiovisual image, on the twofold basis of on (a) the implication *or* dis-implication of point of view physical presence within the diegetic world, and (b) of its human *or* mechanical nature.

Second, I argue that the first-person shot conceived as a "semiotic form" lends perceivable substance to a specific conception of the processes of constitution of subject, which is presently emerging within the field of phenomenologically oriented neurosciences and, more broadly, within our cultural context[24]. According to this conception, subjectivity is linked to perceptual experience and (en)action, involving a close interaction of mind and body. From this perspective, the uniqueness, centrality and consistency of the self should not be considered as original data (as happened in the classical, computational paradigm); on the contrary, all these features would result or "emerge"

[24] For critical examinations of the exchanges between neurocognitive theories and cultural context, see PROTEVI 2009; CHOUDHURY & SLABY, eds., 2012.

from the organism's dynamical act of coping with the environment[25]. In short, it is clear that contemporary neuroscience shifted from a stable "positional" conception of subjectivity (typical of classical cognitive studies), which is now considered as "artificial", to a "relational" and dynamic one, considered as closer to the "natural" and actual condition of the subject – a shift that is effectively expressed in figural terms by the first-person shot[26].

This latter issue entails an extreme hypothesis. We could explain the relation between the raise of first-person shot and the emergence of the dynamical and relational conception of the subject as a kind of *mutual causal determination*. According to this interpretation, the development and widespread diffusion of the first-person shot has been influenced by the emergence and spread of the new dynamic and relational conception of subjectivity. In turn, the first-person shot has been responsible for the spread of a "new" conception of subjectivity, both in the general field of culture and in specific disciplinary areas, such as neurocognitive sciences and film studies. This influence is linked to the fact that the first-person shot does not simply express this new conception of subjectivity in abstract terms, but it rather provides the subjects with a direct experience of a relational, living, active and dynamic constitution of their own subjectivity. As a consequence, the aura of naturalness and immediacy that surrounds the new concept of subjectivity actually results from technological innovations, stylistic transformations, and cultural mediations. To sum up, following this hypothesis, the first-person shot is based on a strange paradox: through the molding of a semiotic figure, a number of techniques of the visible have critically contributed to the naturalization of the self.

[25] See for instance LLINAS 2001; METZINGER 2009; DAMASIO 2010. For the perceptual aspects see in particular NOË 2004.

[26] For cases of empirical research testifying the role of a perceptual first-person perspective within the construction of self awareness, see GANESH et al. 2011; VOGELEY & FINK 2003; VOGELEY et al. 2004. I particularly thank Michele Guerra for these references. For an approach from the Film Studies perspective, see QUENDLER 2011.

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