

Media Convergence and Its Impact on the Moving Picture Art Form

by Timothy Ryerson
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For further information, email: Tim@FilmVideoSolutions.com or visit: www.FilmVideoSolutions.com

The evolution of the motion picture and television industries can be seen as a three-part process that is continually repeated. New technology is developed. This technology is utilized by "outsiders" to expand the expressive potential of the medium. Finally, technology and new artistic vision are appropriated by the industry and become a standard part of the business.

Development of Lightweight Portable Production Equipment

One of the most significant events in the advance of technology occurred in the late '50s: lighter-weight noiseless cameras suitable for filming dialogue with reflex (through-the-lens) viewing and zoom lenses, portable sound recording equipment, film emulsions with increased sensitivity to light and smaller more-powerful lighting equipment.

For the first time, it became possible for a person to hand-hold a camera with a battery pack around his* waist (freeing him from the generator, sound stage or studio back lot), moving freely, confident of knowing exactly what he was filming, adjusting the frame size instantly, recording synchronous dialogue scenes in collaboration with a one or two-person sound crew.

The Studio System, the French New Wave and the American Independents

These technological improvements were quickly employed by two fringe/renege groups of artists: the French New Wave and American independent movements. These brash young artists (Godard, Truffaut and others in France; Cassavetes and others in the United States) with virtually no professional production experience took filmmaking out of the expensive and inauthentic studio environment and into the streets.

The result was a creative burst of spontaneous and "real" films unlike anything previously seen (Godard's *Breathless*, Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, Cassavetes' *Shadows*, and many others). Initially criticized by an outraged old guard for violating rules of film syntax, these young "professionally-ignorant" filmmakers actually increased the expressive qualities of the medium. Today, such previously *verboten* practices as jump cuts and violation of the 180 degree line have been adopted by the industry and are considered standard syntax of filmic expression.

The Importance of Super 8mm Film

In the mid to late 1960s, Super 8mm, a new amateur film format was introduced. With easy-to-load magazines frame that was nearly 50% larger than traditional 8mm film, Super 8mm gave young filmmakers the technology that would enable them to inexpensively produce creative works on film. A new generation of filmmakers was born.

These filmmakers, the first generation able to make creative works on film in their childhood years, explored their art without being hampered by economic considerations or by the bulky size and /weight of professional motion picture equipment. The medium was liberated and by the time the amateur filmmakers graduated into the industry, they were accustomed to making more personal films and moving the camera with extraordinary freedom. Coupled with the underground or independent 16mm artists, Super 8mm also gave filmmakers the technological and economic freedom to more fully explore non-linear filmic works.

This amazing wealth of artistic exploration impacted the industry in several significant ways. Television commercials were transformed -- veering away from short linear stories explaining the benefits of a product to more abstract and artistic explorations. When smaller professional video cameras became a reality in the mid '70s, this non-linear expressionism was a major component in the development of a new art form: the music video. And, as the music video grew in cultural and economic significance, its previously novel expressive components became incorporated in mainstream motion picture and television production.

Portable Videography

With the introduction of low-cost videocorders, young filmmakers were afforded access to benefits that had previously only been affordable to industry professionals: synchronous sound, relatively easy duplication, and quick turnaround (no more time delay sending the film to the drugstore for processing).

The advent of mini-DV technology gives the amateur affordable professional digital videography, and coupled with a personal computer and relatively inexpensive software, near-professional editing capabilities. Moreover, the camera equipment has become so small and light-weight, it opens up exciting new production possibilities.

Digital video technology in conjunction with the internet creates, *for the first time in the amateur talent pool*, the potential for viable replication and distribution to the general public.

Mini-DV technology has the potential to expand the artistic expressiveness of the film/video medium in a much more significant manner than the introductions of the previously-mentioned innovations. An unprecedented number of non-professionals will create the style and content that the motion picture/television industry will eventually appropriate. Indeed, it is entirely within reason that the medium will be transformed in ways that no one can imagine.

The Industry Today

Due to the immediacy made possible through video and the omnipresence of television, we have witnessed, seemingly first-hand, more compelling and real-life situations than any previous generation -- and we have come to understand that life is often more interesting than fiction.

So-called reality programming has become tremendously popular on television. A small professional video crew tapes "real people" in situations that are set up for dramatic impact. Usually portrayed as victims, these people play a reactive (essentially "passive") role for the enjoyment of the viewing audience. The professional and supposedly-objective video crew simply records the unfolding events and, as such, is not part of the story.

But, for programming to be truly authentic and real, there can be no professional crew either. The videographer is the story or is as much a part of the story/event as the people he/she captures on tape. The semi-professional producers of *The Blair Witch Project* understood the new paradigm and employed it as the central conceit of their fictional film -- student filmmakers taping a journal of their search for the Blair witch. The idea of the video-journalist is also used as a leit-motif in the award-winning *American Beauty*.

In the new paradigm, the videographer and other people on tape are documenting their life experiences. In so doing, they are not allowing life to happen to them but are creating an active rather than passive experience -- even if that experience has unfortunate results (as in the above-reference films).

As more people become empowered to record their experiences through the convergent use of the

personal computer, internet and mini-DV technology, we will see both the expansion of the language of cinema/television to heretofore unknown realms and the nurturing and discovery of exciting new talent.

In 1948, the French film critic Aléxandre Astruc wrote an essay *La Caméra-Stylo* ("*The Camera-Pen*") in which he predicted that cinema would become "... a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language." Through the convergence of television (traditionally a "camera" medium) and the internet (traditionally a publishing, i.e., "pen" medium), today's non-professional video-journalists have the potential to fulfill this prophecy.

(* I use the masculine adjective and pronoun because directors of photography and camera operators at this time were virtually all men.)