

BARRY DAY*

The Visual Image

Who was it who said 'The camera cannot lie'? It's been lying in its sprocket holes since Méliès and probably well before — and we've loved every flickering moment of it. We've seen precisely what it wanted us to see, starting with the biggest put-on of all, that when 24 still pictures are pulled in front of our retinas every second we *imagine* we are seeing something move...

What's more, we've been on the receiving end of the illusion for so long now that I really believe it's done something to our perceptions. The way we've been trained to take in the illusion has materially affected the way we see reality. Nor do I mean that merely in the sense of the friend who turned to me at the football match and lamented the fact that the goal he'd half-seen being scored wasn't immediately available on instant replay so that he could *see it properly*.

I'm talking about something more fundamental than that. I'm talking about the way in which a whole generation, irrespective of national origin, has learned a new kind of literacy — *visual* literacy — without a single person making an overt effort to teach them anything.

One set of statistics. A U.S. computation, now several years old, estimated that, by the time he left school, the average American kid would have been exposed to 15,000 hours of television and 500 movies, as opposed to 11,000 hours of formal teaching. That's 11,000 hours of teachers who may or may not be competent or whose competence may never quite stretch into communication against an aggregation of elements employing expensive communications specialists — all of them highly profit-motivated to get their message through.

Even on the simplest reckoning, there's an imbalance. Nor is there any reason to suppose the balance is likely to be markedly less significant in the U.K. than the U.S. But the real significance lies behind the statistics. It lies, in fact, behind the eyes of the Image Generation, a generation of which we're all a part, whether we choose to be or not.

Bear in mind that this generation has literally *seen* everything, even if it's been nowhere, through the bright, beady eye of the cinema or t.v. screen. It's jaded very early in the game with vicarious ex-

perience and soon takes the *déjà vu* view. The genuinely new is consumed on sight, which perhaps accounts for the cyclical hunger for the return of the not-so-new, the current craving for nostalgia. The old things in a new context have a different meaning and are enjoyable all over again on a split level of enjoyment *because* they are creakingly quaint and *because* our sophistication is such that we are able to see that.

For today's viewer the cardinal sin is to be naive without knowing it — for that is to insult his intelligence, his new literacy.

Nor does it do to confuse their new visual literacy with the more traditional kind. This is not something you *add* to reading. The Image Generation by-passes all that. You don't even have to be able to read to be a member of it; all you have to do is 'read' the grammar of the film.

Even the vocabulary is not obligatory. You won't hear much talk of 'I thought the lap dissolves were a little intrusive' or 'Did you notice the way he frame cut on the zoom?' We're not dealing with people who could tell you the difference between a clock wipe and a whip pan but be just a fraction off in the effect you're after and they'll certainly sense it. And they're in too much of a hurry to give you a second chance.

It's not that they mean to be critical but with so much information pouring over them their time and attention is at a premium. Say what you want to say, say it interestingly and above all — get on with it.

All of which has shaped and been shaped, like a perpetual figure 8, by what's happened to that simple little celluloid rectangle (and its electronic equivalent) in all its various combinations.

Because of the random nature of t.v. programming — with newscast cheek by jowl with documentary with commercial with old movie — every t.v. evening represents a constant repertory of the Image past and present, a fascinating kaleidoscope of visual idiom as it is and was. (And even as we watch to see what it's doing, it's doing it to us all over again).

For instance, look what's happened to that classic device, the cut. Time was when the cut was exclusively internal punctuation within a scene. It enables you in a dialogue scene, for instance, to show both speakers simply and without the need to hold

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them frozen in the middle distance to register both presences. It helped you to get closer in to what you wanted to show without the obtrusiveness, perhaps unwanted, of a moving camera. Generally, it helped get rid of the excesses *within* a scene.

But if you wanted to *change* the scene, that was quite another matter. That meant another time, another place and fade out — fade in. If you had a really complicated transition — say, a man traveling from London to New York — it really took some setting up.

Shot of Big Ben. Man gets into taxi. Man boards liner. Liner at sea. Statue of Liberty. Man gets off ship. Taxi draws up at skyscraper. Today you'd probably cut between two ash trays and the audience wouldn't miss a beat or a nuance.

The cut, therefore, as the shortest distance between two points, has simply extended its range. The dislocation that was originally meant to be invisible can now serve a new purpose by being intentional, by creating rapid juxtapositions and, through those juxtapositions, new insights.

Put two apparently unrelated things together and today's audience not only knows that there has to be a relationship but is prepared to work out what it is. Its 'reading' speed is such that it positively demands such shorthand.

While the cut — through the imagination of the editor — has encompassed both connection and dislocation, the *dissolve* has largely taken its existing range and added to it.

Originally, the dissolve softened a transition. It took you from one place to another, one time to another — but it did it in strict chronological *sequence*. How else would people know where they were or what was happening? The most daring use Hollywood in the 1930's found for the dissolve was the *montage* in which a sequence of events was telescoped so that train wheels, dancing legs and destinations all became one. Nonetheless, the narrative was still compressed in sequence.

Today we know enough about those short cuts to be able to stand for something more brutal. We no longer need continuity when there can be both greater speed of communication and depth of meaning by *discontinuity* and *dislocation* of the classic ABC time sequence. Just as past, present and future are all co-present in a typical evening's viewing, so are they now feasible within our individual piece of communications.

Moreover, all of these things reveal a truer approximation to the way the human mind works with its sudden leaps, elisions and associations. Without knowing the first thing about psychology, today's viewer can, I believe, sense the validity of that approximation when faced with it. Thus through the grammar of the film, events became subordinate to connections and relationships.

And in all this the key elements are *compression* — anything that gets to the point quickly — and *involvement*. It becomes an obligatory part of the communication process to allow the viewer room to get into the act, to be given clues but to complete the message to some degree for himself. Now, more than at any time and because of all that's gone before, the observer is part of what he observes, the audience part of the performance.

No doubt technology has had an important role in shaping the role of the image. Quite apart from what the editor's scissors have been able to do to rearrange the *order* of the frame and give it new meaning, a great deal has happened to allow us to modify the *content* of the frame.

New lenses and improved film stock have helped us to film where we couldn't film, to slow down reality so that we can examine its nature more closely and with different emotional perception, to pick out a tiny detail and turn it into the universe.

The zoom lens give our eyes an instant extra dimension while the handheld camera gave us a totally new perspective on the nature of reality by disturbing forever the careful, aesthetic and

The quintessence of compression in communication is the t.v commercial. Analysis of a current Martini commercial shows some of the techniques referred to above at work. The film employs a series of fast cuts — there are 44 separate shots in the 45 second film — edited to the rhythm of the backing music track. From the first frame the product is established as the hero and is then intercut with the succeeding activity so that the repetitive juxtaposition of shots establishes a causal relationship between Martini and the social events we are watching.

Because of the familiarity of the brand name, the earlier product sequences (Frames 1/3) concentrate on the appetite appeal of the drink, leaving the revealing of the bottle until later in the film. When it does arrive, the familiar object (Frames 5/7) has its impact heightened by having a tight downward panning shot continually interrupted so that the viewer only glimpses a detail at a time and works to complete the scene by providing information from

previous experience of the product. Naturally, this kind of visual licence is only possible with a very familiar product.

The same principle is applied to the 'social' sequences. After two or three shots (Frames 2/4/6/8/9) the audience has 'learned' that the film is about people riding horses. From that point the composition, number and length of individual shots can be varied endlessly because the eye has been trained to accept the visual link between them.

Equally, with today's audience you can disrupt chronology. Strictly speaking, the Martini will be drunk after the ride but again, once repetition has conditioned the viewer to understand that cause (Frames 17/19) and anticipated effect (Frames 13/15/16/21/23) are inter-related, he can accept that everything, including the Martini (Frames 14/18/20/22/24), is part of the same emotional totality — a totality closely cued and keyed by the use of music.

1



Try a taste of Martini

2



The most beautiful drink in the world

3



4



5



It's the bright one

6



the right one

7



It's Martini

8



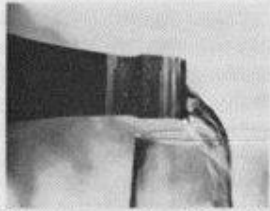
Anytime,

9



Any place, Anywhere

10



There's a wonderful world you can share

11



12



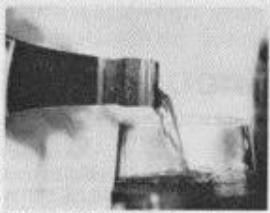
In the bright taste

13



of the right one

14



That's Martini

15



(Music)

16



17



18



19



(Music)

20



21



22



It's the bright one

23



The right one

24



It's Martini

anonymous balance a generation of film makers had striven to achieve. But from now on a shaking camera hunting focus will be synonymous with being there and everything else will be artifice.

But, of course, the cardinal error, as always, is to regard the present as an autopsy on the past. If we stop to see what's happened — a difficult enough task in view of the speed at which we're traveling — some sort of retrospective analysis of the Image is possible. Unfortunately, by the time we've done our homework, in reality we're already somewhere else.

What's impossible to evaluate yet is the effect that all the current and imminent experiments with the Image *will* have. My guess is that they will not be just simple additions but more like geometric progression coming on top of what has gone before — especially as most of these experiments seem to be approaching a common target, however vaguely defined, in parallel directions.

They are all attempting to probe, through their various techniques, our *state of mind*. They all realise that communication is a multi-level business dealing in multiple messages *simultaneously*.

Thus the key psychedelic sequences in Kubrick's *2001* had no need for a 'meaning' in the old sense. All they had to do was trigger off our thought patterns and throw in a few clues for good measure.

The multiple imagery, multi-screen techniques commercially spawned by events like Expo 67 and by film innovators like Saul Bass and Francis Thompson — who see the world with other eyes and

wish to share that vision — has also proved that a mass audience is now perfectly capable of taking in more than one image at a time because they no longer need to read those images in the old literal way. *Gestalt* would be a meaningless word to them but that's what they're about.

And then there's the whole use of videotape as something more than a copying tool, a Xerox machine that moves. The potential of the electronic, as opposed to the film, Image has only begun to be considered though, significantly, the improving economics of cost as well as the new creative stimulus are causing a situation in the U.S where many a young moviemaker is turning to tape as his means of making instant and personal movies. In many almost psychological ways, as McLuhan will tell you, the t.v Image is even more involving than the film Image.

If that's so, then we've only just begun. Which is a sobering thought because in our high speed, disposable, all-at-once world the communicators seem to be in a unique position.

Since D. W. Griffith invented the close-up, we've thrown nothing away. If something seemed outmoded, inevitably it's come back with a new use in a new context. And with every day that passes somebody comes up with something new.

It's a bit like starting a game of golf with an infinite variety of clubs. All you know is that somewhere in that bag is the winning combination. And you can be sure of one other thing — it's going to be quite a game !