

The Tale of Anode and Cathode

by Mike Mills

Ideally the design of communications equipment should proceed like the natural time-consuming crafting of musical instruments. Melodies and messages both exhibit patterns and rhythms which permit their composition. But the structures of the mind—from which these emerge and which they can easily penetrate—remain mostly undisclosed.

To make matters worse, the designer and user of the new technologies, unlike the music craftman and concert performer, finds it difficult to know when he has built or uses a medium which generates "sour" chords.

And throughout the dilemma, the technology of communication is not following a natural kind of evolution but gathering mass-produced momentum that makes the head reel.

In the past two years, my friends and I have explored a range of video techniques in a range of communication environments. And the effects which they produced sometimes affected me like good music—spontaneous, exciting, soothing to the psyche. But at times, ugh. Like the singing of Jerry Lewis.

Although I cannot detail why certain communication environments resonate with good feeling or good "vibes", certain trends are becoming evident. I would like to discuss a couple of these instances along with some "theory" or speculation as to why they do the way they do.

First, I should say that there is probably no video or "communications" system that is optimum for any particular communication context. Just like old

records, systems can become redundant.

OK. Which systems were interesting? They fall basically into two categories. Those which are concerned with what has been called here "self-processing" but which I prefer to call technologically-induced self-confrontation (video is not the only medium capable of this. Script, photos, mirrors, spoons, water, all kinds of reflections). Those which were used for "interaction" i.e. when more than one person communicates using the medium in a real-time mode. This could involve man-computer-video interactions. Obviously elements of "self-confrontation" of self-interaction must exist simultaneously with bidirectional or two-man interactions.

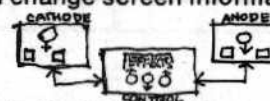
The self-confrontation thing has probably been beaten to death in this and other publications so it is better left untouched. Except to admit that all communication is ultimately self-communication and sets limits on interaction with other people. In fact, interaction between people might more accurately be described as simultaneous tandem self-communication. It's almost like a gymnast doing a handstand claiming he's doing two 'one-handers' at the same time.

Probably one of the most interesting "video interactions" I took part in happened at a well-known university where graduate voyeurs began "gaming" with television (we used to call it television in those days), manipulating a kind of erotic behavior. We had at our disposal a 1950's type studio with special effects generator and other goodies. We recruited one male and one female participant whose images are now part of history. Let's call them Anode and Cathode.

Now, on the morning of the interaction, Anode had little if any knowledge of Cathode—strangers you might say. We placed Anode (the male) in one room and provided him with camera and monitor. For Cathode (a female almost capable of melting the phosphor off our screens) the same environment was provided along with props such as huge wooden boxes to sit on. Through the system, Anode and Cathode could talk to each other.

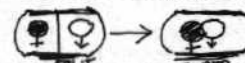
And we, the three graduate voyeurs, bedded down in the control-room with our gadgets and buttons with which we could change screen information on both screens in both rooms simultaneously.

Like so:



The point to keep in mind is that a multi-party communication situation existed with the two participants able to react and respond to (1) their own movements (2) each other's images (3) the happenings in the common space which they shared with the controllers. In other words, if we split the screen which placed both their images in different halves of the screen, they had no choice but to swing with it and modify their behaviour appropriately.

It might be as follows:



Now. Our objective, not particularly honorable, was to use a series of effects (change the screen information) gradually and subjectively so as to urge the couple to control their images in artistic eroticism and/or in the finest porno tradition. In other words, is TV sex possible in real time?

Needless to say, a tricky but interesting business.