

stars. To pass from TV to film is like Gulliver traveling from the Lilliputians to the land of giants.

Even government leaders who commit astonishing acts of terror on the world are curiously non-threatening, like Howdy-Doody puppets. How can we take their menace seriously when they are ten or at most twenty inches big?

Not only the human body, but everything in Nature is made underwhelming. The Grand Canyon is reduced to a few sine curves. The videotape image is a bit like a papier-mache diorama. The viewer must work harder to achieve an illusion of three-dimensionality, because video photography is less able than film photography to achieve depth of field.

The importance of deep-focus photography has been an aesthetic issue in film criticism ever since the early 1940s. Andre Bazin, the great French critic, argued that films which opened up the plane of focus like Citizen Kane were a gain in the presentation of reality, because they allowed the spectator to follow actions within a spatial continuity, "a unity of time and place." Montage, which selects the significant detail preliminarily for the viewer, was replaced by a more fluid camera style that panned or tracked the characters from room to room in long-duration takes. Thus depth of focus gave the spectator more freedom, like the theater-viewer, to choose which part of the picture was significant.

One can argue with Bazin's assertion that deep-focus filmmaking automatically brings us closer to reality. But in one sense the argument seems true: depth of focus reunited characters with their backgrounds, their physical environment. Architecture, ceilings, windows, furniture -- the trappings of history became the objective envelope in which a man's destiny, however private or idiosyncratic (like Kane's) would have to unwind. No longer would it be easy to divorce a man's aspirations from his time and milieu -- which, from the standpoint of historical consciousness was something to be pleased about.

A Drama of Faces

If we are at all sympathetic to the deep focus viewpoint, then videotape would seem to be a step away from realism. The background definition is very slight. The portapak camera systems give little information beyond the central subject. The viewer supplies his own backgrounds largely through memory: a blur of faces at the ball game connotes a crowd; a corner of a kitchen table conjures up an apartment.

Most videotape scenes begin with a medium shot of the subject or subjects from the stomach up. Then a zoom into one of the faces. A love of faces is not compulsory for videotape work, but it helps. There is the tendency to isolate the face in its flower-like separateness (separate not only from the surround-

ing environment, but from the trunk of the body.) The frown lines on the brow seem to be struggling to convert themselves into words issuing from the lips.

It is with this stumbling struggle to articulate that the viewer identifies, and that gives videotape much of its shock of recognition.

The popularity of soap operas is directly linked to this dramatic struggle to say the unsayable -- to turn thought into confession. The camerawork, which is fairly stylized, promotes the sensation of the stress and difficulty of interaction, with its constant threat of a misunderstanding, through a pattern of closeups and reverse shots. The tension is built up by cutting from one closeup to another, including having the frowning actor digest words spoken off screen, until a release takes place through a shot combining both figures.

The persuasiveness of the soap opera in the face of its obvious plot absurdities, comes largely from the camerawork which hits at the viewers' anxieties about interactional misunderstandings, by denying the spatial connection between one man and another, by isolating each in his inner mood.

Consider another afternoon television show, the Watergate Hearings. The hearings illustrate some of the problems of respecting spatial continuity in videotape reportage. Because of the physical setup of the committee room it would be difficult to combine both accuser and accused in a single angle. Moreover, this is probably not even seen as desirable. The drama is built out of alternating closeups, inquisition and response (as in Dreyer's Passion of Joan of Arc.) Thus, although witnesses and investigators are in the same room they do not seem to occupy the same shared space. The implication grows that they are on different moral planes or from different galaxies -- a dangerous impression, however much the camerawork, or our own sympathies might lead us to think.

The split screen device, with its black line running down the middle, if anything exaggerates the box-like isolation of the two sides: Haldeman/Baker; Demon/Knight, depending on how your prejudices run. The split screen image eerily isolates both men in another way: neither subject is engaging the other's eye contact within the frame.

Videotape and the Look of Reality

Many people who use videotape for the first time marvel at how "true to life" it looks. It is not only their excitement that a picture of any kind came out. It is also that they feel their own lives have that texture, that lighting, that peculiarly flat grey-and-whiteness they are looking at.

Yet nothing is more tricky in art or popular culture than the assumption that one has finally got hold of a mirror of reality. A technological improvement, a change of fashions make audiences