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**A LOOK AT THE AESTHETIC AND EDUCATIONAL QUALITIES OF VIDEO AND DRAMA**

**by Isabelle Kim (Canada)**

**Abstract**

What is more important 'the drama's medium or the power of drama in and of itself that enables learning, regardless of the medium? This paper argues that it is the process irrespective of the medium used that matters most pedagogically. Video is explored as medium, product, and video-making as process, in light of potential uses in drama education. I address the distinct aesthetic properties inherent to each medium (live drama and video) that affect the learning experience in different ways, joining insights gained from my experiences as a video-maker and beginner drama educator with those of contemporary drama, video, and film educators and scholars.

**EDITOR: It is impossible to reprint the abstract in French and Spanish, owing to platform transcription issues. We apologise for this.]**

**Author's biography**

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## A LOOK AT THE AESTHETIC AND EDUCATIONAL QUALITIES OF VIDEO AND DRAMA

The inspiration for this article comes from Lori McDougall's article *As the World Turns: The Changing Role of Popular Drama in International Development Education* (2003). The article discusses a study that compared the educational impact of live drama versus mass media in a project about leprosy in India. The study's findings challenge the hegemony of live drama over mass media in international development education. McDougall poses a question that arises in my own work (making a fiction video about HIV/AIDS with a group of Chinese-Canadian youths). What is more important 'the drama's medium or the power of drama in and of itself; a power that enables learning, regardless of the medium? I will argue that it is the process irrespective of the medium used that matters most pedagogically. Video is explored as medium (digital video camera) and product, and video-making as a process, in light of its potential uses in drama and education. Parallels between video and drama-making practices as process rather than product, will be drawn while keeping in mind that process and product are more on an ever-shifting continuum rather than at polar ends. I will also address the distinct aesthetic properties inherent in each medium (live drama and video) that affect the learning experience in important ways. I join insights gained from my experiences as an educator and video-maker with those of contemporary drama, video, and film educators and scholars.

### Definitions

For the purposes of this article, I want to refrain from using terms like 'participatory video', 'drama in education', or 'process drama', 'theatre' etc., partly to make clear distinctions between content and form: between drama itself and the different media it uses such as live performance, film, video, television. The term 'drama' will simply refer to the noun, or activity itself and 'drama-making' the action. Similarly, video refers to the medium (digital video camera) and video-making the action of creating a video. I am primarily interested here in the making of dramatic (fictional) rather than non-fiction videos, but I will address the documentary video form briefly as well, in the context of social activism. A live drama performance is a process which is happening in the moment, which feeds off its reception, which is 'unfinished', which always contains within it the potential to change. In other words, in non-live performances the processes of preparation, presentation, and reception can only move (or influence) in a clockwise direction. In live performance, the potential always exists for the processes to be influenced either way. (Mock, 2000:6).

It is also important to consider the methods and goals. Educators, artists, and activists who use drama with a pedagogical goal in mind, such as leprosy education in McDougall's India study, may share a common goal. However there are various media, including live performances and video, and processes that can be used to achieve this goal. The methods may involve processes that are more collective or more hierarchical, regardless of the medium used for the drama.

From experience working with collective creation principles in both drama-making and video-making, I believe in a collective creation that is process-oriented rather than goal-oriented; horizontal rather than hierarchical; and in which 'the meaning of the experience is negotiated and recreated 'i in terms of the context and purposes of the participants' (O'Toole 1992, 3:33). A collective in which there are active participants, what Boal (1977) calls 'spect-actors' rather than passive recipients, will result in a more meaningful learning experience for all participants involved than will a more hierarchical process, regardless of whether the drama is live or not. A process that seeks to foster authentic thinking, concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication [in which] the subordination of students to teachers becomes impossible, '...(a) process of humanization action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it...' (Freire 1993: 58,60). However, live drama is unique in its ability to create intimate and immediate interaction between actors and spect-actors:

'people engage with, and learn through, drama as participants in the imagined action not as spectators and observers of it as they would be in relation to examples drawn from story or film. (Neelands 1992:28).

In the fall of 2002, I started working as a coordinator and educator on a community-based, youth video-making project. The main project goal was to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS issues through the creation of short videos in Cantonese, English, and Mandarin made by and for Chinese-Canadian young people aged 15 to 30. The young people unanimously opted to create a short fiction video

rather than a documentary format. They felt that the best way to address the complexity of HIV/AIDS issues would be through fiction. Despite the fact that they had little or no experience of video and drama-making, they seemed to know instinctively that:

We start with narrative. It is necessary. It situates our knowledge in time and place, and that is not only an artistic effect, for the knowledge which we would describe is intertwined with neighbourhoods, errands, bicycles, antibiotics, and begonias (Grumet 1991:87).

When they asked for 'drama workshops', I initially panicked. As a video-maker and community educator, I had narrowly conceived of the project as 'a public education video project', without ever considering the potential 'drama' aspect. I had naively planned for only video-making and HIV/AIDS education workshops only, not for 'drama workshops'. I had always enjoyed drama and was interested in learning how to use it, but had never facilitated drama workshops. I was fortunate enough to find support and resources from graduate courses in drama and education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). Drama-making was to become a pivotal process in coming up with the scenario, script-development, and much more. Moreover, whilst learning the video-making aspects of the project was enjoyable, it was the improvised, informal, live drama-making in our 'drama workshops' from which the young people and I gained the most in learning and enjoyment.

We used live drama to brainstorm scenario ideas for the fiction video. At the beginning of the project, I was disappointed but not surprised that the stories were wildly elaborate and exotic, often unabashedly 'borrowed' directly from popular movies and television. Over time, however, as the group became more comfortable with drama-making, the depth and range of their created roles and plotlines increased. We had reached, in accordance with Neelands's 'Scale of Formal Participation' where 1 is total and 6 is passive participation in a dramatic event, the first degree, that of 'Players':

Participants are physically and psychically engaged in the dramatic action, which require actions-to-be-taken in order to progress. 'Dramatic playing' is the exemplary form of this level of participation<sup>1</sup>; At this level of participation there is the illusion, at least, of total transformation; the intention is that the participants will be personally transformed by the activity and they are rewarded for exhibiting responses and behaviours that conform to the 'illusion of transformation' (Neelands, 2000:50).

The group slowly began to draw on their personal stories and knowledge for creative material in such a way that the plotlines became in a sense, more 'simple', whilst at the same time being complex. The resultant script, co-written by the whole group over the last several months, is a meta-narrative. For instance, the protagonist, Cedric, is a social work student doing a placement at a community centre, much like two of the group, who are studying Social Work. The young people, formerly only media-consumers, had transformed themselves into media-makers.

It is difficult to think of young imaginations being freed without young learners first finding out how to take a critical and thoughtful approach to the simulacra, the fabricated realities, presented to them by the media. To think in relation to what we are doing is to be conscious of ourselves struggling to make meanings, to make critical sense of what authoritative others are offering as objectively, authoritatively 'real'. When we hold an image of what is objectively 'the fact', it has the effect of reifying what we experience, making our experience resistant to re-evaluation and change rather than open to imagination. (Greene, 1995:126).

### **Drama's special characteristics**

What is special about drama itself that makes it a potentially potent learning experience? Drama-making allows us to be conscious of ourselves struggling to make meanings, and therefore to be openly and actively responsive to learning in both a creative and critical mode. Dorothy Heathcote argues that drama's pedagogical potential lies in its ability to show change. Drama 'does not freeze a moment in time, it freezes a problem in time, and you examine the problem as the people go through a process of change' (Heathcote, in Johnson & O'Neill, 1991:115). In psychology terms,

Cognitive and emotional involvement is the main reason why drama is expected to have greater effects on audience individuals than other types of communication '<sup>1</sup> Drama theory<sup>1</sup> explain[s] how confrontation and emotion lead to character change within drama and, by analogy, to change in real-life dramas as well '<sup>1</sup>how emotion can change social relationships

(Kincaid, 2002:39,140).

In *The Rainbow of Desire*, Boal discusses the therapeutic potential of drama in the context of psychotherapy: The 'patient' is not a passive recipient of treatment, but

'I is the director of his or her own therapeutic process with the presence of a participatory audience acting as a multiple mirror to enable multiple readings of past (and always present) events. (Boal, 1995: xviii/xxiii/xx).

Where there has been much social conflict, like in South Africa, people turn to drama as a means of conflict resolution and for healing unhealthy social relationships amongst opposing groups. Alanis Obomsawin speaks about the South African Aboriginal belief that 'the healing is to going to come from where the pain came' (Kin-Gagnon and Fung 2002:93). Social and individual healing and collective creation processes require some level of trust amongst the participants:

Drama not only requires participants to establish a network of trust with a number of participants, but also to find ways of working which demonstrate reciprocal respect for each others' physical, emotional and intellectual well-being (Nicholson 2002:, 83).

An ethic of care in drama education does not suggest, however, that there should always be consensus and harmony at all times but rather 'a robust environment in which debate, dissent, generosity and artistic experimentation might be encouraged and valued' (ibid: 90). A creative learning environment based on trust is a safe and welcome haven for youths' 'wild thoughts', the kind of thoughts that are all too often discouraged in classrooms, where there seems to be a fight between wild thoughts and classroom order and between wild thoughts and their adventure with intelligibility. 'We ask students to hold that thought for another time. We ask what does that have to do with this, or we say "Don't get me off the topic?", or maybe "How did that thought pop into your head, what were you thinking?" We worry about staying in the right place, of ordering thoughts so that they can be easily learned' (Britzman 2001: 12).

### **Video as an educational medium and process**

Like live drama-making processes, video-making processes range from rigidly hierarchical to collective. There is a growing network of relationships between drama and video-makers that uses collective creation processes, and an increasing use of the video as a medium for drama. DeeDee Halleck, founder of Paper Tiger Television and Deep Dish Satellite Network, notes:

The Brazilian video community, informed by the movements of the base community churches, and Paulo Freire's literacy campaigns, [and Augusto Boal's popular theatre work] has grown to an outstanding size. Over 350 community video groups exist in Brazil and they have formed a powerful alternative network (Halleck 2002:311).

Pioneer videomaker activists, artists, and educators like San Diego-based Halleck and Luis Santoro borrow from collective creation principles and methods used by drama educators and social activists, such as Boal's forum theatre and his other 'theatre of the oppressed' conventions. Luis Santoro is a Brazilian, community-based videomaker, who works with small-format video with the trade unions of Brazil. His primary goal is to use video to facilitate dialogue between historically conflicting groups rather than to create products (Halleck 2002). Video practices that share qualities of openness, social justice, a sense of community and a collaborative nature are sometimes referred to as 'participatory video'.

Digital video is very useful and unique in its relatively cheap capacity to record sound and movement, and in its outreach capabilities (compared to film at least). Video's movement and sound recording capacity can make video more effective than photography as a tool for social change. It was a video camera that brought to light the truth of the Rodney King crime. The documentary, *Seeing is believing: camcorders, and human rights*, (3 November 2002) suggests that access to digital video technology can empower communities and individual. With the use of camcorders, disenfranchised, wronged community groups in the Philippines, the ex-Congo, and the US were able to obtain visible proof (the one that counts most in courts) of their plight and obtain legal action, drawing international attention to their cause.

Video cameras and digital editing softwares are also becoming progressively cheaper and easier-to-use, a contributing factor to digital video becoming widely used as a tool for social change as well as a recording device and art medium amongst artists, educators, and activists worldwide. For example, *Blah, Blah, Blah* was a series of artists' short videotapes critiquing the Quebec summit (Lee & Sakamoto 2002). In Nicaragua, the camcorder 'is a part of a social dynamic that is transforming a country. Video is not just documenting that process. It is very much part of that process' (Halleck 2002: 289). Part of the answer may lie in the effects of globalization. Activist groups are becoming global and are taking advantage of the more extensive, transnational reach of digital tools like video cameras.

### **Video and live drama**

While video is a medium gaining popularity amongst social activists, the...

...field of educational research has not yet begun to explore the ways in which, say film [or video] might be used to help people understand what schooling is about, how teaching may proceed, or what students might be learning' (Barone & Eisner 1997:91).

Drama-making, through its narrative essence, provides a vehicle for learning through imagination and story-telling which facilitates a process of change. The process of making fiction videos uses a narrative mode of learning as well, and thus the potential of video-making in education is similar to that of drama in education. If the process of making a fiction video is collective and fosters authentic outcomes based on an ethics of trust, making drama, whether in a live or digital form, will encourage experiential rather than more passive learning. After all, drama- and video-making, like living, are by nature multi-sensory learning experiences. Drama and video-making can also both be an aesthetic (or anaesthetic) learning experience in which 'the material experienced runs its course to fulfilment...then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experiences from other experiences' (Dewey 1934:35).

Drama-making whether using a live or digital form is a cultural action that 'is always a systematic and deliberate form of action which operates upon the social structure, either with the objective of preserving the structure or of transforming it' (Freire 1993:160). Cultural invasion occurs when 'the actors draw the thematic content of their action from their own values and ideology; their starting point is their own world, from which they enter the world of those they invade' (161). To avoid cultural invasion both video and drama educators/artists/activists can use the principles of what Freire calls problem-posing education, in which students are critical thinkers instead of passive recipients... 'they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in process' (64).

A video viewing experience is different in many ways from that of a live theatre. Viewing digital renditions of drama adds a few degrees of separation between audience and the drama, because the video medium is less immediate, visceral, and interactive by nature than the medium of live drama. Pavis suggests that there are aesthetic qualities proper to the film/video medium that create a...

cinematic language of close-ups, long shots, in order to give a living and very subjective impression of the [live version of the drama]' In the 'theater film', the camera moves toward its object, trying to capture it; in the 'film film', the object is placed in relation to the camera' The filmic narrative is structured around units and types of shot, ' (sequence shot, scale of shots) (Pavis, 2003:109-111).

It can be argued that the viewing a drama on video or film is a much less active learning experience than participating as a spect-actor in a live drama performance because the video medium tends to elicit a more 'passive' response and is more 'distant'. One great distinction between live and video media is that with video, the drama viewed has first been filtered through the point of view of the video-maker(s). The video medium has the ability to control viewers' attention and perception through the use of focus, framing, digital editing, ability to alter time-space relations, and to create other special effects not possible in a live drama. The viewer only sees the polished end-product rather than the drama-making process that can be made visible in drama conventions like improvisation and forum theatre. This can greatly affect and control the viewer's perception and experience. Deren suggests that the use of a camera in drama can also lead to...

...a lazy reliance on an essentially decorative use of scenery and realistic detail. A plot so dull that it would not hold the attention of the theatre audience of more than a moment, borrows a superficial excitement from a frequent change of location, angles, and similar movements of

the camera. (Deren 1946:49).

However, the degree of audience participation will depend on the viewer/spect-actor's engagement with the material, whether it is mere recognition or active perception. It is possible to remain very passive despite being a participant in a forum theatre experience, while one can be actively engaged whilst viewing a video or film. According to Dewey:

Receptivity is a process consisting of a series of responsive acts that accumulate toward objective fulfillment. Otherwise there is not perception but recognition. The difference is immense. Recognition is perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely' In recognition we fall back, as upon a stereotype, upon some previously formed scheme' to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. The artist selected, simplified, clarified, abridged and condensed operations according to his interest. The beholder must [actively] go through these operations accordingly to his point of view and interest (Dewey, 1934:52-54).

Videos are sometimes screened in a way that invites audience interaction with the content in an attempt to reproduce the immediacy, interactivity, and intimacy of a live drama, like *TV Maxambomba*, a videomobile that visits the favelas (poor neighbourhoods) of Rio every evening on different street corners - the video equivalent to Boal's forum theatre experiments. While these types of collective, interactive video-viewing activities can be very participatory the viewer will never enjoy the same degree of participation as the live drama spect-actor who can jump into a forum theatre or improvised plot immediately so as to affect a change in plot or character. Once a videotape has been shot and edited, changes simply cannot be effected by participants as immediately or actively as they could in a live drama context. There is an additional access issue involved with digital media: cost and digital video technology literacy, which is not widespread. It is also difficult to involve more than a few people in video- making compared to live drama collective creations.

There are varying degrees of participation available, access and use issues involved with each medium that need to be taken into consideration when comparing and using the medium of live and non-live in drama and education. Critical reflections on the India study described in the McDougall article will be our starting point from which to look at some of the ways live drama and digital media are used and the effects of these uses. According to McDougall...

there is much untapped potential of TV- and radio-based drama for effective development education' opportunities abound for synergies between mass media and live drama, particularly in regard to participatory formats and processes in areas underserved by the electronic media' one wonders about the possibility of combining video screenings of high quality drama-based TV programmes with participatory drama/discussion exercises linked to the video programme. This could deliver the best of both worlds: standardized high-quality education with community participation' (McDougall, 2001:1, 6).

### **Access, outreach, and pedagogical issues**

McDougall suggests that one of the factors that contributed to the mass media's 'stronger educational muscle' over that of live folk drama's, is the 'quality of the productions and the ability to 'standardize' the educational content' (2001:5). The assumption that mass media performances are by nature of higher quality than those found in live folk drama, and that this "polished" quality is the gold standard, reveals a societal obsession with standardization and intolerance of imperfections. Moreover, I would like to interrogate the term "quality", a concept that is 'contextual and constantly shifting' (Fung & Kin-Gagnon 2002:48). Who is defining what the criteria of a 'quality' performance are, and for whom? Boal, O'Neill, Heathcote and many other drama educators would argue that it is precisely the non-standardized, interactive qualities of live drama that make this medium conducive to learning. However, in certain contexts where the educators' goal is primarily to pass on facts and where inaccuracy would be very detrimental such as on cigarette-smoking or diabetes symptoms, then standardization of the content is paramount and most effectively achieved through a non-live medium. When drama is used to address conflicts, such as bullying in schools and homophobia, or to create an interactive dialogue about social issues such as HIV/AIDS, family violence, and racial conflicts, I believe live drama to be the most effective learning medium. However, the experience will only be a positive one for its participants if the drama-making process fosters critical thinking within a learning environment based on an ethic of care and trust and if the process is not culturally invasive.

McDougall writes of television's power to create a cumulative educational effect in a way that a one-time drama cannot. (2001: 5). This cumulative effect can result in greater longer-term memory of the

information and that can be helpful for example, in remembering how often to get a health prevention procedure. Media does allow for wider and economically efficient coverage in areas where there is widespread access to television and cable connections but not in poorer areas without access. The costs of making and screening a dramatic video with those of preparing and staging live drama make interesting comparison: the former will be more expensive if the costs of the equipment, production, and editing, etc, outweigh personnel costs involved in creating live drama and these costs, and access to these resources, will vary widely.

Videos can be put on web sites, shown on television, as televised Public Service Announcements (PSA), etc. While the cumulative effect made possible by digital technology can result in greater outreach there is a delicate balance between quality and quantity. Too much exposure can result in viewers becoming desensitised. I believe that live rather than video medium may eventually enjoy greater popularity as viewers become more aware of the possibilities of digital technology to greatly alter digital video footage, and thus become more suspicious of what they see on television, films and videotapes. Amongst media artists, there is a trend towards returning to simpler forms: 'many media artists are returning to the tactility of super-8 film, the casualness of low-format video, and the spontaneity of performance' (Fung and Kin-Gagnon 2000: 48).

## Conclusions

My experiences with drama/video-making have been mostly with young people and adults in community- based fiction video projects, so my reflections may or may not be relevant in other contexts. Going back to McDougall's question, is it the medium or the power of drama itself that determines its effects? 'Everything depends upon the way in which material is used when it operates as a medium' (Dewey 1934, 63). However, there are different possibilities and limits imposed by the particular properties of the live and digital medium. For instance, the digital video medium has the inherent ability to affect viewers' perceptions and possibilities of focus. While participation in a drama is always on a sliding scale and depends on the process involved in the drama-making regardless of its form, live drama will always be more visceral. As McDougall suggests, there are synergistic opportunities for digital and live forms of drama. There are interactive websites, television and radio programmes in which viewers are encouraged to call with suggestions, points of views, etc. Theatre, '...at times, imitate[s] the methods (however unexploited) of film by a 'realism' of seeing, frequent changes of scene, and a panoramic idea of construction' (Deren 1946: 9). I would like to conclude by furthering inquiry about drama by challenging the traditional notions of live and mediated performances.

the (live) performance only exists as it is received (and, even then, not necessarily by a 'traditional' audience-it could be received by other participants, the performer herself, a camera, or even possibly the 'space')... There is no reason to suggest that 'mediatized' performances cannot be live. Some are and some are not... Stelarc's internet performances, ... show how 'liveness' does not need to even occur in the same time, let alone space, as the audience (Mock 2000:6).

There is great potential for artist-educators to use collective creation processes based on trust, using drama's traditional, live, and new multi-media forms, while considering 'liveness' in drama education.

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