Building Possible Dreams

Heitor Capuzzo
Professor and Director
midia@rte Laboratory
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Abstract

Never before have media had such a strong effect on life as in the 21st century. Looking at the history of moving images in the previous century – the visions and agendas of filmmakers, corporations, and governments – we find evidence of the potential for humanistic inclusion and exclusion. Do digital media increase our understanding of life and cultures? Is there the potential to know ourselves better by recreating life in an artificial environment? Is the fascination with artificial worlds proof of our limited understanding of the "analog" human experience?

It is possible to control and destroy cultures. When it happens, human heritage is impoverished, and the world has less diversity and less focus. The corporate digital media revolution is a kind of involution, a return to the type of destruction of colonial eras that exploited continents. With the current level of destruction at its highest level, our life experience is disconnected from the physical world.

Digital media can be a negative game, entertaining young people with virtual destruction, preparing them for analog wars and a multifaceted system of economic domination. Misinformation, decreased plurality of viewpoints, increased disconnection with life, and the spectacularization of human experience are only some of the symptoms of the strategies used by the corporate media world.

Our analog lives need analog values connected to nature and respect for our planet and its fragile resources. These values must inform our digital world.

Moving images began in scientific labs with experiments by researchers such as Pierre Jules-Janssen, Étienne-Jules Marey, and Eadweard Muybridge. Initially, their goal was to understand natural phenomena more deeply by reconstructing points of view that were impossible to perceive with the human eye.

Jules-Janssen used his "photographic revolver" to register and study Venus' 1874 transit across the sun. Marey and Muybridge focused their research on human and animal movements. These mechanical devices expanded our field of vision and helped us to deal with the complexity of our perception.

In the beginning of the 20th century, geographic societies sponsored trips around the world, and pioneers of documentary films recorded some of those expeditions. The visual medium was an important instrument to inform and diffuse exploratory travel devoted to exotic places and civilizations. These films documented multicultural encounters between filmmakers and native cultures, expanding our knowledge about countries and people far from urban life in the West. Some of these films are today considered classics of documentary cinema.

After the 1910s, the moving image became a powerful international industry in the US, where it was connected to the idea of entertainment. Films were made like industrial products, although we find many examples that transcend this concept. Of course, some famous film artists had the power to control their works, so their films bore the imprint of their particular worldview. Charles Chaplin's character, the tramp, became a powerful and poetic metaphor about modern life and social exclusion. The tramp was an outsider, who tried hard to be accepted socially but was always rejected by the system. His empathy with audiences was unique in film history, and it is not a coincidence that the most famous cinema character was a loser. Chaplin is a powerful example of the dichotomy between the human being and the corporate system.

During Lenin's era in Russia, the cinema, which was considered to be the most important art form, was believed to be a way to synthesize time and space, not only by enhancing our vision, but by visualizing abstract ideas. Dziga Vertov, one of the Russian mentors during the Soviet avant-garde film era, referred to the moving camera as a "mechanical eye." This central role for the cinema was the first large social experience in which motion pictures were used to represent social utopia,

and later, political propaganda. One of Lenin's proposals was to use cinema to represent the new Soviet Union, the utopia of a new man, and a new Russian consciousness for a new century. The camera became an instrument for serving revolutionary ideals.

Inside Russia, cine-trains (community productions in mobile projection and lab units) increased the political role of moving images. They connected film with the people who were the subjects of its content. According to the filmmaker Chris Marker, more than giving films to the people, cine-trains gave cinema to ordinary Soviet workers, who made films about themselves and controlled the process.

Aesthetically, these films presented several strategies, such as a focus on the editing process, creating a dialectal shock of images with fast cuts that increased the intellectual activity of the audience. Russian filmmakers affirmed that editing was central to the meaning-making process of the cinema, which is obvious in documentaries that used footage from several sources to create a collective contribution constructed from points of view from the new revolution.

During the same time, mainly in Western Europe, countries such as Germany developed clandestine production to misinform the public about the dangers of communism. Relying on the power of the visual record and on an aesthetic of the documentary, those films fictionalized and staged the "facts," which inaugurated the use of moving images for Cold War propaganda.

If the motion-picture was a mechanical eye, film editing was considered a mechanical brain: virtual images expressing the analog perception of the world. The power of cinema was taken seriously in several countries, and the history of the 20th century, for the first time in human experience, was registered more in images than in words.

During the 1930s, under the Stalin era, the government adopted radical new policies that transformed the Russian avant-garde cinema into controlled production. Ideas of collective production or intellectual editing were substituted for the classical strategies of social melodrama, to serve Stalin's new agenda of the cult of personality. The films presented Russia as "the big mother" or "Mother Russia," and Stalin was "the father" of the people. In these propaganda films, the old role of the czar evolved into that of the new "great father." As opposed to the slow but careful democratic process of debate and discussion established by Lenin, now the celluloid "father" looked after every detail of daily life. If tractors broke down, Stalin appeared personally to repair them.

Fictional feature films produced under Stalin's personal supervision suggested the possibility that working people might write directly to Stalin, "the father," to express their needs, make suggestions, and file complaints about the workings of the state. The result was mass murders in Russia. Cinema helped to detect and destroy "the complainers," or better yet, people with critical points of view. More than edu-

cating people, moving images were a powerful tool for social control. Stalinist-era films presented happy communities in the countryside singing and working hard to fulfill Stalin's requests for increased production. United they were, but only on the screen, since prisons were secretly full of what they called "anti-patriotic Russians," or "counter revolutionaries."

Ironically, in these films Stalin was played by Mikhail Gelovani, a professional actor. Audiences believed in this Stalin "clone," who appeared more convincing than the original one.

In the US, when the economic crash of 1929 led to the Great Depression, the cinema was already a major industry. President Roosevelt proposed the New Deal, a controversial strategy for a new contract between capital and workers to help control the resulting social crises, and major film companies released feature films appealing for tolerance, charity, and Christianity. The work of filmmaker Frank Capra was one of the symbols of the popularization of these policies. The government and the film industry worked together to deal with reconstruction of the national economy, without making any kind of fundamental changes in the economic structure.

At the same time in England, filmmaker John Grierson proposed different strategies for moving images, using film to educate the huge contingent of country workers moving into large cities. Mainly documentaries and docudramas, Grierson's productions integrated working-class people into modern industrial society. Some of the best international experimental filmmakers, such as Norman McLaren and Len Lye, began their careers as part of this new experience. Grierson also invited avant-garde artist Alberto Cavalcanti to be part of this rare example of experimental and social filmmaking, in which media were used as a powerful tool for social inclusion.

The educational cycle of films produced and supervised by Grierson at the General Post Office succeeded in presenting careful and didactic narratives, teaching workers how to use the telephone, about the trajectory of a letter processed by the post office, about the daily life of fishermen, and how to handle the miracle of having food in the home in an organized and affordable way. Modern cities were new spaces where everybody would need to be connected in networks, collaborating in the collective process of constructing a new and more equal society.

But in the 1930s, words such as equality, collective, and social inclusion were synonymous with communism. Europe was traumatized by the Russian Revolution, and a new age of radical conservative and aggressive agendas was aligned against all manner of worker organization. The first shocking confrontation of these ideas was in the Spanish Civil War, where a left-wing democratic government, elected by a democratic majority, was overthrown by a coup d'état organized by the Spanish army. Young people around the world volunteered to fight against the enemies of democracy, but their dreams of a more just society were destroyed when foreign governments allied themselves with the military coup. European countries

such as Germany and even Russia quietly helped the Spanish military fight against the rebels and the perceived dangers of communism.

Documentary films were used to generate international sympathy and raise funds for the Spanish rebels. In this example, film was not used as propaganda, but rather as a warning about the way international economic power was disregarding the democratic process and destroying lives.

The Spanish Civil War was a macabre rehearsal for the main conflict that was starting in Europe. Hitler became the most powerful dictator in history, and from 1933 until his downfall, the German media were completely controlled by Joseph Goebbels, his minister of propaganda.

Media thus entered a new era. Events were planned and rehearsed meticulously for the spectacularization of the facts. The "truth" was the result of the cynical talent of filmmakers and propaganda professionals such as Leni Riefenstahl, and this evil theater made possible the mass murder of millions of innocent people. In the hands of the German government and the international corporations that supported it, media became an instrument of racism, propaganda, and the Holocaust. With the justification of scientific research, cameras registered the reactions of victims of gas-chamber massacres. Some of the most repulsive images of our time were captured during those indelible and horrible years.

World War II was displayed on thousands of movie screens around the world, and cine-news created a virtual understanding of the conflict. Because of the power of these reports, all nations involved in the war rigorously controlled what could and could not be shown. Editing to filter the facts was always controlled by government strategies.

Canada was one of the countries that decided to create a national office for cinema, and John Grierson was one of the main leaders in developing the National Film Board. Again, his goal was to use media as an inclusive process, rescuing the citizenship of millions of people who had been atomized and traumatized by their experiences in the Second World War.

Although governments were controlling all information rigorously, moving images were for the first time accepted as documentary proof in the Nürnberg trials of German war criminals, where two documentaries were screened about Nazi concentration camps and the Nazi atrocities against the Soviets during the German invasion of Russia. Both films begin with a formal document signed by either the US or Russian governments certifying that all images were taken, edited, and presented without any kind of manipulation or special effect. The power of some sequences cannot be described in words. The unbelievable scale of the Nazi atrocities was beyond human comprehension.

The post-war period would be remembered as the escalation of the Cold War. In the US, the media became transmitters of ideological propaganda, misinforming the public, aggressively cultivating fear and panic, and creating a permanent

state of alert for possible external attacks. The nuclear era produced some ridiculous documentaries that tried to "educate" people against an eventual atomic attack by the enemy. Several pseudo-educational films were screened in schools, teaching children how they could be protected from this danger by ducking and covering beneath school desks. While the anti-communist campaign increased, more than 400 atomic tests were carried out in the Pacific Ocean from the mid 1940s to the 1950s. In the US, several feature films exploited heightened emotions and terror through monsters such as giant spiders, body snatchers, and red aliens from Mars.

The communist media campaign had its parallel strategies, developed mainly by filmmaker Roman Karmen. This Russian propaganda mentor traveled around the world teaching local filmmakers how to best present their revolutionary leaders. A large part of the media material about national leaders such as Mao Tse Tung, Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, and Salvador Allende made use of Karmen's guidelines. He personally shot films that were used as propaganda inside these countries, and he was a mentor to leftist filmmakers, providing instruction on the best camera angles, how to show victories, battles, etc.

In Italy, the post-war cinema was reborn from the ashes like a phoenix, giving new life to films about daily life from a strong humanistic point of view. This neo-realist movement was a strong reaction against the emptiness of bourgeois feature production during Mussolini's era. Cinema helped Italians to understand and reconstruct their own identity. Filmmakers like Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, Luchino Visconti, Federico Fellini, Pietro Germi, and so many other talented artists, proposed an aesthetic that transcended the nationalist approach, influencing filmmakers in many countries, including Brazil.

If Dziga Vertov used the expression "camera eye" in the 1920s, Latin-American filmmakers referred to this device as a virtual weapon in the 1960s. "Camera as a machine gun" was the political adjective used to refer to Latin American films made against US intervention in these countries. Military dictatorships governed many Latin America nations during that time, and independent media became an important way to resist so many political murders. The international recognition of Cuba's new revolutionary government in 1959 renewed the desire for sovereignty. Soon afterward, strong censorship led filmmakers to develop metaphorical narrative strategies as a way to resist and survive in those "black years," a euphemism for the time when democracy was totally absent. Because of this history, the cinema in Latin America has not had a strong connection with the idea of media as a social control. Such overt techniques were developed mainly as corporate media strategies for television production during the dictatorships.

Control of media products was consistently rehearsed and improved over several decades. Spectacularization increased and with it an interest in high-impact media events, exploitation, and recourse to easy emotions. At the same time, this process had a complex dynamic during the Vietnam War. Television news presented all kinds of visual information about battles and combat. Attempts to intensify the impact of images on televised news generated unintended rejection from American public opinion. There was too much reality in the shows. Exploitation of bloody and mangled bodies turned into a disturbing spectacle, bringing into US homes what up until then was happening outside the country in Vietnamese territory, far away from home. The anti-war movement grew as a result of how these images were shown, and because of the civil rights movement and independent media groups that defended democracy and free speech. These independent films were powerful in facilitating a realization that the government's agenda was the opposite of human-rights ideals.

This phenomenon could never happen again. Control of media is much stronger today. During the Iraq war, for example, news coverage prevents the public from contact with the gritty effects of massive bomb attacks. News cameras were strategically positioned to provide aerial points of view that show targets as tiny points on a map.

With the advent of digital resources, equipment is more accessible for alternative groups and independent producers. At the same time, corporate media are able to use satellites to centralize and control production and international distribution. Digital mass media are highly global, which has led to a noticeable lack of diversity in content and aesthetics, while the borders between entertainment and news reporting are increasingly eroding.

Television reality shows continue to capitalize on the idea that everyone is a celebrity and everything is an event. There is no need for content. According to this strategy, daily life can be turned into a spectacular experience. Shows such as Big Brother normalized the idea of surveillance, making it something banal and funny in daily life. According to these shows, privacy is to be avoided, because private events could be suspicious.

These kinds of mass-media products synthesize corporate structures. The products are the "reality." There is no social responsibility. It is strong, powerful, seductive, and empty. And they are always recyclable as stylish packaging, authoritarian, and predatory. They are techno-fascist structures against humanism and life.

But digital media could also be the synthesis of ideas of past visionaries. Abstract animation and synthetic images were used by experimental filmmakers such as Len Lye, Norman McLaren, and John Whitney. Stan Brakhage defined their films as visual thinking, as they tried to push media ahead as a new language. Using visual resources to understand the mystery of the human mind and the workings of the brain, these artists proposed a visual kinetic dialogue with echoes from dream theory and surrealist experience developed also by the French avant-garde films during the 1920s.

According to the Hollywood film industry, the potential of digital media lies mainly in fantasy: creation of synthetic characters and worlds, war games, and narrative environments disconnected from daily experience. The disconnection between human beings and nature is reinforced by this superficial strategy. There is little room for intellectual activity in these products. At the same time, sophisticated systems are developing conceptual environments such as Second Life when the first "real life" can no longer be maintained due to vast destruction of the natural environment. The idea that nothing is impossible in the digital era is one of the big lies of our contemporary mass culture. The fragile nature of digital tools is announced by the imminent energy crisis, and life on earth is already on the edge of destruction.

Hybrid media present a powerful tool to connect languages and people, expand our senses, and reconnect human experience with nature and life. Virtual images could be a strategy for understanding our subjectivity, our dreams, and aspirations, and helping us to find beauty in understanding each other, not inside patterns, but in a multiplicity of possibilities.

There is still a fantastic opportunity for development of digital media, mainly as resistance to the monopoly of corporate products.

When the filmmaker Ingmar Bergman gave us close-ups of his characters, we felt the infinite geography of the human face. The camera turned into a unique mechanical eye, helping us to see what would be impossible to see without special devices. Bergman's work is a celebration of the collective invention started by film pioneers Jannsen, Marey, and Muybridge.

It is necessary to rethink the idea of moving images, so we can understand our world from new points of view. It is better to believe that mankind is still reliable. If this is naïve, at least it is better than being cynical. Cynicism is for corporations. Human beings need to be dreamers.

Friedrich Hölderlin, the poet, wrote: "Men are men when they think, and turn into gods when they dream."