

The “Mobile Effect” on Screen Format: the Case of Vertical Videos

Maria Donata Napoli

Dipartimento di Progettazione e Arti applicate,
Accademia di Belle Arti di Palermo,
Palermo, Italia

donata.napoli@accademiadipalermo.it

ABSTRACT

The videos made through mobile phones are probably changing the way we think of videos created to tell or show something, both imaginary tales or private movies, or even chronicles of events to spread rapidly through the web. A change has already occurred in the use, as the new digital portable devices allowed to concentrate on a single medium a variety of media with various functions. Therefore, a tool like the telephone has been enhanced with new features typically designed for other media.

In this process of appropriation, new mobile devices changed the way these new features are being used, due, of course, to new conditions. Other than multiplying the production of images that one would call "dirty" due to the presence of rough movements, continuous zoom in and zoom out and, of course, broadcast sub-standard video quality, the new tools introduced the practice of vertical shooting, so inducing a habit.

In the history of photography, however, the two formats, landscape and portrait, have always lived together. This paper aims to analyze, briefly, a situation in rapid and continuous evolution, also characterized by the presence of new paradigms responding to visual aesthetic rules that are gradually being defined.

KEYWORDS

Mobile Devices; Smartphones; Screen Format; Vertical Video; Mobile Film-making.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The main effect of the massive use of mobile devices, and one that will likely have the most long-term consequences, is perhaps what concerns the use of images. There are various online videos showing very young children who use tablets very confidently and, above all, manage photographs and videos with great ability. The thing that impresses most is to note that, after they have successfully magnified and flipped through photographs using touch technology, these children repeat the same actions even when faced with images printed on paper magazines.

These new devices also combine multiple tools into one, facilitating the task of the new prosumer and placing new challenges for manufacturers of photographic and video cameras to overcome these technological multitools. Finally, these devices allow to "adapt" to the type of image being viewed, that is, by rotating the orientation of the screen, they let you get the best picture possible.

This can be considered “normal” when it comes to photographic images. However it does not apply when it comes to moving images that, having inherited the characteristics of Cinema, were traditionally tied to the landscape format, despite the continuous technological progress.

Today, in fact, the real potential of these tools seems sometimes held back by the power of cultural interfaces borrowed from previous media. It is therefore worthwhile to estimate how much the

experimentation now in place is able to exert major influence on changes in perception of audiovisual, without underestimating the effects or dismissing them simplistically as "mistakes to avoid."

2 | THE MOVING IMAGE AND THE ISSUE OF SCREEN SIZE

At what point in the history of cinema did the horizontal rectangular screen become the only possible solution? In the early thirties of the twentieth century in Hollywood the topic was still debated [1] with the intervention of influential filmmakers and film theorists, so the final adoption of the horizontal format was far from obvious. Sergej Eisenstein, among them, spent a long time to annul the widespread belief that horizontal format was the best one since the human being turns more easily the head from right to left and vice versa, rather than from the top downwards and back; he was convinced of the importance of both formats but without the predominance of one over the other, so he came to the proposal, never adopted, of a square screen capable of "embrace all the multitude of expressive rectangles of the world" (Eisenstein, 1982).

From the early days of cinema up to more recent times, we know that the only changes actually adopted in the format of the screen involved an increasing horizontality from the format 1.17:1 [2] to the most famous 4:3 [3], up to Cinemascope [4]. Consequently, different formats have gradually set a technical standard that is now a model firmly linked to the cinematographic imagery.

Some exceptions to the rule that considers the horizontal size as the only suitable to tell stories, come from video art. As often happens, in fact, artists are able to anticipate significant modifications of the manner in which the instruments are used (McLuhan, 1989), suggesting alternative procedures and criteria to those that are the usual technical and aesthetic paradigms.

As an example, we can cite a work of Bill Viola, *The Greeting* (1995), which is inspired by Pontormo's *Visitazione* (1529). As well as the subject and the general structure, it also reproduces its vertical format through the video ratio, then is being projected on a vertical screen. His connection with the classical art is a constant that, today, can be rendered at its best thanks to the possibility to use high-definition flat

screens which, in addition to the extreme slowing of the speed of reproduction, produce a result similar to extremely bright paintings that only through prolonged observation reveal their being moving images. Another example is the series "The Dreamers", exhibited in 2013 at Blain|Southern in London, which consists of seven vertical underwater portraits of men and women, seen through the same number of 65" plasma screens, vertically mounted in a dark room.

In addition to having frequently used the vertical format, Bill Viola also used the square format for another video, *Emergence* (2002), somehow anticipating the reopening of a debate that could lead to review the rules of film composition.

Few years ago, one of the most used photo app for smartphones, *Instagram*, has introduced the "video" function to their users. Instagram videos keep the main features of the photography function, that are the possibility to apply filters and, especially, the square format. Just before Instagram, *Vine* also allowed to create short square videos to share through social networks, especially through *Twitter* that acquired Vine in 2012.

In this way, those who criticize the improper "vertical shooting posture" due to mobile devices, could have the opportunity to add to their disapproval the square format that, taking advantage of a wider "social" spreading than that allowed by video art, should have the opportunity to become viral.

2.1 VERTICAL VIDEOS: AN UNJUSTIFIED SKEPTICISM?

It is possible to understand the mechanism that pushes us to look with suspicion any innovative proposal, since these may not always lead to effective and positive changes or technical developments. In this case, the supporters of the landscape format have come to define ironically a real disorder, VVS – Vertical Video Syndrome, also inviting those interested to avoid shooting in portrait mode.

Moreover, similar debates have occurred each time a new medium has intervened to modify the production and use of the images, in the attempt to figure out how many and what scenarios were about to open, whether hope for the new changes or, on the contrary, put prudential brakes.

However, apart from being apocalyptic or integrated, it can be useful not preclude the chance to understand if an innovation has some potentials, albeit annoying or disruptive or even cause of choc, one could say, quoting Walter Benjamin. It is undeniable that the new portable media of communication have radically changed not only the production but also the use of still and moving images which can now rotate, adjust to mobile screens, change size for better reading, so changing the way the images are viewed, hence making the thought of using a single format for their production anachronistic.

The "new" moving images, those made with mobile devices, have characteristics (or defects) that describe then a stereotype: the portrait orientation of the screen, the low resolution and the imperfection of the shooting technique. In the last two cases, the stereotype has been "accepted" as it is and in fact, although most mobile devices allow to shoot in HD, the "amateur film" effect is often simulated by other media through pixelated and blurry images or interlaced [5] on purpose; very specific aesthetic choices that give the shots a more spontaneous and urgent aspect, as if they were stolen or suddenly "captured" images. In this way a certain kind of video is taking shape as if its author were eyewitnessing the event, both private or public; the lack of flaws, in fact, negates the presence of the man behind the lens and produce almost neutral images, with no emotional involvement.

Therefore, the characteristics of these videos are on the one hand solely tolerated because as a general fact this amateur genre is accepted as it is, with all its technical flaws; on the other hand, these features are already obsolete since the technological evolution allows mobile devices to shoot with a better quality. By refusing *a priori* the possibility that such characteristics can induce a modification of the traditional aesthetic models, however, we would make a mistake. Considering the freedom allowed by all these new recording and storing tools, why should the final work be caged in inflexible playback rules? Why not take into consideration the possibility that a film can be shot in landscape or portrait mode according to narrative or aesthetic needs, without thereby diminishing its value, rather recognizing a merit to experimentation?

In the end, as Dennis Hopper once said, is it not true that "movies are made of light" [6]? Is it not simplistic to think that it is the format the main part of the work?

3 | CONCLUSION

As mentioned, regardless of the mode and usage habits of smartphones, in the history of photography the two formats, vertical and horizontal, have always lived together and, with them, the square format, becoming characteristic of some types of photography rather than others. Therefore, horizontal photography has been traditionally considered the most suitable to show places and, in particular, landscapes, while vertical photography has been used to enhance the portrait or those elements of landscape with the prevalence of vertical lines, as trees or buildings. Something changed when Cinema firmly adopted the horizontal format, not without first analyzing and debating whether to use different formats.

Today the debate is reopened thanks to the new portable devices both with regards to the photographic image, which has seen extraordinary spread of the square (Instagram.com, Hipstamatic.com, 6x6 on jag.gr/6x6), and also, as mentioned, about shooting and viewing videos.

Precisely into this context, as is suggested here, we are experiencing significant changes with regard to the production and use of moving images. Mobile devices, in fact, allow filming, editing and live streaming with great ease and rapidity, while maintaining a quality which, though not referred to as broadcast, may be considered as acquired. The big TV companies are increasingly using footage that prosumers put online, without worrying of the possible difference in resolution, actually ever decreasing; nor care about the format which, even when vertical, can easily become rectangular through the use of sidebands.

In the past, this footage would have been defined as made by amateurs, but today it perfectly identify a time in which we can all contribute to information and communication on the net. As Walter Murch reminds in his book "In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing", "every significant technological advance raises a desire to explore that you can satisfy only by creating a pretext for exploration" and, at that stage,

the content is left out in favor of the experimentation with the medium. An apparently superficial experimentation that is typical of a new aesthetic world (Frazzetto, 2010).

We might be already, then, at a later stage to the simple exploration: the media that we use today to create movies are extremely versatile and easy to handle, they are characterized by the possibility of being used in a creative way and, at the same time, they are suitable to describe and testify facts and real places. The results are now recognizable and recognized by an audience of viewers who are themselves producers of images, both horizontal or vertical. The hypothesis that the vertical format is not an error, but one of the many communication possibilities at our disposal, is supported by a video produced and distributed in July 2016 by BBC Media Action with the aim of making the viewer empathize with an imaginary refugee escaping from the Middle East (<http://bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/reports/voices-of-refugees>).

Furthermore, from an artistic point of view, in the last year we notice some attention to the vertical video: "Vertical Cinema" is an Austrian project with ten vertical movies commissioned to an equal number of international artists and filmmakers, then screened in various exclusive locations in the Netherlands (verticalcinema.org); the "Adelaide Film Festival 2015" hosted a special event, a Showcase of Vertical Cinema (adelaidofilmfestival.org); in May 2016 the 2nd edition of the "Vertical Film Festival" took place in Katoomba, Australia (verticalfilmfestival.com.au).

What has been reported here, makes us think that, in the near future, it might lead to a significant change in the way we think of film and moving images, overcoming prejudices and criticism by going through a necessary phase of experimentation and, probably, metabolization.

ENDNOTES

[1] In 1927, Abel Gance directed the movie "Napoleon" in which he adopted a format that tripled the size of 4:3, leading to an ultra panoramic 4:1 ratio.

[2] Also known as Movietone format, typical of the transition from silent films to sound films: the size ratio 1.33:1, peculiar to the 35mm film, in this case was

reduced by the presence of the optical soundtrack next to the frames.

[3] Mainly used to indicate the ratio of television screens and monitors, is another term for the "classic" format 1.33:1.

[4] Panoramic cinematic format, with a ratio of 2.35:1, from which modern television and film formats are derived, albeit with ratios less widened.

[5] The pixelated images are characterized by a rough definition that makes visible the minimum elements of the image itself, precisely the pixels; instead, interlaced images are characterized by the visibility of the lines composing the picture, with a particular "fringed" effect corresponding to the moving parts of the image.

[6] Dennis Hopper, interviewed by Brad Darrach for LIFE Magazine, June 19, 1970.

REFERENCES

Ambrosini, M., & Maina, G., & Marcheschi, E. (a cura di) (2009). *I film in tasca. Videofonino, cinema e televisione*, Felici Editore, Ghezzano (PI).

Benjamin, W. (2012). *Aura e choc. Saggi sulla teoria dei media*, Einaudi, Torino.

Bolter, J. D., & Grusin, R. (2002). *Remediation. Competizione e integrazione tra media vecchi e nuovi*, Edizioni Guerini, Milano.

Debray, R. (1999). *Vita e morte dell'immagine. Una storia dello sguardo in Occidente*, Il Castoro, Milano.

Eco, U. (1987). *Apocalittici e integrati*, Tascabili Bompiani, Milano.

Eisenstejn, S., & Leyda, J. (1982). *Film Essays and a Lecture*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ.

Eisenstejn, S. M. (2000). *Lezioni di regia*, Einaudi, Torino.

Eisenstejn, S. M. (2003). *La forma cinematografica*, Einaudi, Torino.

Folsom, T. (2013). *Hopper: A Journey Into the American Dream*, Harpercollins Publishers, NY.

Frazzetto, G. (2010). *Molte vite in multiversi. Nuovi media e arte quotidiana*, Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine.

Manovich, L. (2002). *Il Linguaggio dei Nuovi Media*, Edizioni Olivares, Milano.

McLuhan, M., & Powers, B. R. (1989). *Il villaggio globale. XXI secolo: trasformazioni nella vita e nei media*, SugarCo Edizioni, Carnago (VA).

McLuhan, M. (2002). *Gli strumenti del comunicare. Mass media e società moderna*, NET, Milano.

Murch, W. (2013). *In un batter d'occhi. Una prospettiva sul montaggio cinematografico nell'era digitale*, Lindau, Torino.

Perov, K. (a cura di) (2008). *Bill Viola. Visioni interiori* (catalogo della mostra, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Roma), Giunti Arte Mostre Musei, Firenze 2008.

Perov, K., & Fletcher, J., & Fahnestock, M. (2013). *Bill Viola. Frustrated Actions and Futile Gestures*, Blain|Southern, London.

Valentini, V. (a cura di) (1993). *Bill Viola. Vedere con la mente e con il cuore*, Gangemi Editore, Roma.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Maria Donata Napoli studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Catania, Italy. Since the beginning of Nineties she is interested in video, photography and painting taking part in reviews, personal and collective exhibitions in Italy and abroad. She studies the mass media system and the music video field and teaches "Teoria e metodo dei Mass Media" at the Academy of Fine Arts.