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The Ethos and the Framing

- a Study in the Rhetoric of the TV-camera

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Abstract:

I want to present a model for distinguishing different types of authority, ethos and power-relations inherent in the way in which politicians and experts are being filmed and portrayed on TV.

The framing, camera-angle, distance as well as certain features of light, sound and possible motion - in short: the camera-work constitutes important but often unrecognized aspects of the rhetoric of modern media using "talking heads".

We all immediately recognize the close-up, direct camera-gazing authority of the presidential address as well as the credibility of the news host sitting behind a desk. We are also familiar with the appearance of experts or politicians being interviewed and shown in semi-profile - and thus having a slightly lower status than the president or the program host.

The reporter in the field is often being filmed with a microphone in hand and standing up (we see the upper half or more of the body) in front of some building or important location. The reporter often points away to the building or people in the background. The host of sports programs and the speaker of the weather report appear in a more causal way - almost like stand up comedians: tree-quarters of body showing and moving about a bit. In mere entertainment programs the hosts are often entering the stage in fancy ways accompanied by music and light effects. This elaboration of the entering process or coming on stage of the pop-star host is to some degree comparable to the widely used welcoming parades of statesmen and royalties.

So to a large extent it is the work of the camera that visualizes and determines the ethos of the speaker on TV - long before and long after the actual words. This is what I want to present in the form of a typology or model of "the ethos of the framing".

The simple model

My point of departure is a very simple model - indeed so simple that at first it was hardly more than a joke I presented to some students in order to make them wonder about our customary ways of categorizing TV-programs into different genres and subgenres: I suggested boldly that we only have 3 types of TV-programs:

1) The serious ones with a close up of a talking head sitting down like in the news.

- 2) The half-serious ones with a talking head standing up and shown in a medium shot like in the weather forecast.
- 3) The entertainment programs with a host entering in a glamorous way, perhaps running or dancing along and shown full size and subsequently in a variety of shots exhibiting the physical performance.

And so according to this model the level of seriousness and credibility of any TV-program could be read off immediately by looking at how the body of the host of the program was framed by the camera. Or in referring to the concept of ethos appeal from classical rhetoric one might say that the authority and respectability of the speaker seemed to depend on the appearance of a talking head without too much body. The more body: the less ethos-appeal. Or so it seemed.

Elaboration of the model

Now of course a lot of exceptions and objections to this rough model could be mentioned, e.g. the fact that not all TV-programs have a visible, on screen speaking host, but perhaps only a voice over. And is it not a matter of interpretation and perhaps highly subjective sentiments whether a program should be considered serious or not? Is it not possible to be both serious and entertaining at the same time? And what about fiction programs like a TV crime story that has no speaker or host in any ordinary sense: how could that fit into the three categories of how the host was framed by the camera?

Despite these obvious objections I still find it very illuminating to pay attention to the way in which the camera frames the speaker. Certain standard ways of distributing authority or ethos to the talking host seem to be at work on a global scale - or at least throughout those western TV channels with which I am familiar. Perhaps this depends to some degree on culture and current fashion - besides technical development - but it seems also to be deeply rooted in history - in the history of representational art and in ordinary discourse (consider the seemingly trivial metaphor "a head of state"). And perhaps there is something "natural" or "instinctive" about this way of perceiving different levels of status? Anyway, before I venture into any such general interpretations I want to present some of my more immediate observations regarding the role of the camera.

One source of inspiration for this has been watching and analyzing a variety of professional TV-productions. I should mention also the inspiration from the Danish scholar Lennard Højbjerg in his small book from 1996: *Fortælle teori 1 - Audiovisuel formidling*. But perhaps more eye opening to me has it been to conduct a number of workshops in video production for students at various levels. Very often the unskilled amateur is able to draw attention to the otherwise unnoticed secrets of the art of effective camera work.

Level 1 - the parental pose

Level 1 is the portrait - a close up or medium close up shot from the chest and up - of a talking head facing us and having eye contact with us (the camera/viewer). This talking head is either sitting down like the newsreader behind a desk or standing up as

in the presidential address, but then with the waist and lower part of the body covered by a speaker's rostrum.



This framing of the speaking person conveys the highest degree of respect, authority and credibility - in principle, that is. Of course we may have reasons to doubt or even disrespect the specific person appearing on TV, but that will be for other reasons: the camera is here doing the best it can to build up the ethos of the speaker. I borrow the term "ethos" from classical rhetoric and should perhaps mention that it has little to do with modern conceptions of ethics. Among the three modes of appeal (logos, pathos, ethos) the ethos-appeal deals with the status or respectability of the speaking person. It is not about ethical arguments or moral issues in the speech, but it refers to the trustworthiness of the speaker's appearance. Classical rhetoric often points out that a speaker himself really should believe in what he is saying in order appear trustworthy, but at the same time the nobility or high social status of the person is included in the ethos-concept: it is the appearance of status that appeals. And in our culture a dark suit with a white shirt and a tie seem to be the mark of trustworthiness.

However, the main point of my model here is not the nature of the person nor is it the performance within the picture frame, but the cinematographic form and significance of this type of shot. We see only the face and upper part of the speaker's body, the speaker is facing us directly, even with eye-contact (as it were) at we are placed (by the camera) in a position not higher than the speaker, but sometimes even in a position a bit lower (typical not of the news but of the presidential or royal address). The camera is not handheld and hardly ever moving in any way. Occasionally a very slow and soft, usually unrecognized zooming in on the speaker can be seen, e.g. when Danish television transmits the speech of the queen on New Years Eve. This feature goes to underline the atmosphere of awe and intensity. The speaker is in a way drawing us in closer - or rather that is what the camera is miming.

I find that "the parental gaze" or perhaps "the parental posture" could be a nice name for this type of portrait and the rather locked position of the viewer. We are not free to move about or to take a more checking or observing look from the side of the person. We are being addressed directly and are supposed to listen carefully. Clearly men and women of power and status have been depicted in this way for a very long time: in photography, in painting, and in sculpture. One can speculate why it is that the rest of the body seems to be neglected or hidden in this type of representation. And perhaps there is something significant in the rostrum and in the desktop or studio-table: is it

molding the image of the speaker into the image of the parent sitting at the end of the dining table residing over the family?

In order to reinforce the live and (in Roman Jakobson's terms) phatic contact with the viewer the producer is often switching between cameras during a news program. And it works well, the newsreader turns to a new camera and looks at the audience with renewed intensity and starts out on a new story. Once in a while there is a mistake, and that is very revealing: the intensity and authority breaks down, we do not hear what is being said and after some confusion the newsreader starts all over on the story - this time to the right camera. To the audience the "wrong" camera angle had the effect that the speaker was addressing somebody else - not unlike perhaps, when one of our parents addressed not us but our noisy little sister at the dinner table.

Level 2 - the good neighbor

Level 2 in this model of how the TV-camera distributes ethos to the speaker is the medium shot. Here we get to see more of the body than just the talking head, but usually the lower part of the legs and feet are outside the view. This framing is often used for the weather forecast, sports news and for showing the reporter on location out in the field. In these programs the speaking host is usually standing up and a bit more lively than the sitting newsreader using gestures and perhaps pointing or showing us something. Often the background of the picture is a part of the message - the reporter is on the actual scene of the events.



Often enough the body language of the speaker is here a bit more casual and relaxed and may even form part of the message: I have earlier made some closer studies of weather forecasts on TV and their reception, and one of my observations was that the behavior, dress, smile, jokes and occasional fumbles of the weather host was what turned the programs into fine and popular TV (not the need for information about weather conditions). Also it seems like the seriousness of the hard core news need to be balanced by some more relaxed presentation - and for this reason the weather man or weather girl is framed differently, not as the grave parent at the end of the table, but more like the good neighbor with whom we chat over the low hedge. Sometimes this change in the framing and in the ethos-level is marked in a transition shot showing the newsreader sitting down and handing the word and the floor to the stand-up weather

reporter for a few minutes. The framing reinforces who is the real host or anchor of the overall news program.



Certain camera movements like slow pans and travels can be used in connection with the reporter on location or even when showing the host of the sports news slowly walking about in the studio and casually sitting down on the edge of a table or perhaps leaning against the back of an armchair while talking. This sort of relaxed behavior, the motion of the camera and the framing of the speaking body seem to indicate at once, that this is not just public service information about important issues, but also meant to fulfill a cultural or social feel-good function. The stand-up talking host is our friend on the job or at least some nice person chatting with us. The same attitude and framing of the host can be recognized in programs about culture, gardening and handicraft.

Level 3 - the circus clown

Level 3 is the wide shot or full view of the talking host - typical of entertainment programs. We see the entire body, at least in some shots, from various angles, and the camera follows or even enhances through dynamic camera movements the performance and moves of the host. Very often the very start of light entertainment programs like a quiz or a talk-show seem to point in the direction of something spectacular and sensational: the entrance of the host of the program seem to be a major event in itself. He or she is running down some set of stairs built for the occasion or arriving on a motorbike or by means of some other moving device or vehicle. And all of this motion is underlined by a dynamic camera (besides dynamic editing, music, applause, light and smoke effects). The camera follows along making us perhaps impressed with the vitality and elegance of the host. Perhaps the host will eventually sit down, but then typically in an open armchair and not hiding behind a desk. The speaker will from time to time have eye-contact with the camera, but is also being shown from various other angles.



During a live entertainment show both the producer and the camera -people are usually very active. The camera might be carried by a crawling or running photographer or swung round by a crane, and all sorts of angles, filters and movements, also very rapid ones, seem to be part of the TV-show. The talking host is being celebrated or even worshipped as it were by the camera, and views of the audience (and the sound of the applause - fake or not) assists in this. This all of this goes to underline the popularity of the host, but it does not add to the credibility or ethos of the speaking host in a strict sense: we do not expect to hear about important global news or about which policy to adopt on the tax issues from person filmed and framed in this way, And in case we saw one of our well known newsreaders enter and dance about in this way in front of the camera we would immediately expect it to be not the news but some entertainment or charity program.



I use the expression "clown in circus" for this framing by the camera of a speaking host - not in order to say there is anything wrong about entertainment nor about showing the whole body and movements of a speaker, but because it seems to me to be an apt analogy to the way the camera framing (and the editing and so on) positions the spectator. It is not like looking some authority at the end of the table, nor is it like chatting with a friend at work or with a good neighbor over the hedge. It is more like viewing from a distance, and not necessarily from one fixed position. The camera work imitates agitation and excitement (this is not so much the result of the framing as of the camera movements and the editing).

Modification

What I try to focus on in this small paper is only the framing of the TV-camera and how this feature seems to distribute different levels of ethos to the speaker. It is of course an abstraction to talk about the framing of a person by the camera in isolation from camera angle, camera movement, light, sound and editing, and I have to refer to these other features once in a while in order to make my point somewhat clear. And it can also be said that it is strange to talk about the form of the filming more than about the content, i.e. the nature of the speaker or the speech in question. However, as a preliminary tool for further analysis I find it rewarding to look at the more formal or "technical" aspects of presenting the speaker or host - this is part of the rhetoric of modern, global visualization on TV and on www.

I should mention shortly that there might be an important difference between two seemingly similar medium close up shots like the ones included below. In one case the speaker is having direct eye contact with the camera in the other the person talking is seen in half profile. We immediately recognize a reporter on location in one of the pictures, ready to inform us about what is going on - and not just because he holds a microphone. But the other person is about to air his expert opinion or perhaps his political or personal opinion. This has to do of course with the direction of the gaze - and we rapidly infer who is in charge of the situation. Actually it is probably the host at the news desk in the studio that has the top command. The reporter is only there as our extended eyes and ears. Whereas the interview person (actually the conservative mayor of Ledøje-Smørum community) is only there representing a specific point of view. The camera angle more than the framing seize is here the informative feature.



Just very briefly I should perhaps mention that the three levels of ethos can be recognized also when it comes to the voice-overs in TV-programs without a visible host.

In some documentaries and nature programs we have a voice corresponding to the first level of ethos: this is the near to the ear (microphone) voice of high credibility. The voice has been carefully recorded and controlled; it has nothing casual or incidental about it.

On the second level we have the slightly more informal voice of the sports commentator, nowadays very often produced as an ongoing dialogue and chat between two (friendly) people. The microphones here often pick up the ambient sound, and the sound level and other features of the sound are less static. On the third level of ethos we have the noise of the crowd or the studio audience - like the faked laughter (canned laughter) trying to persuade us that this sit-com is funny.

Now further on it can be argued that even TV-programs like a fiction crime-story without any on screen or off screen speaking host still has some sort of ethos appeal - or that it at least should be possible to look for such an aspect. And indeed I find it possible to interpret a crime story on TV as revealing something about the ethos of the author, director, perhaps the photographer or producer as well - but that is really to push the concept a bit too far. What I wanted to do in this small, unfinished paper was just to draw attention to the question of how, and to what extent, the TV-camera can frame both the speaker and the audience at the same time.



Or, to end this paper on a more humorous note: as I am rather tired of watching the hovering parental gaze of certain heads of state on my TV I would find it very refreshing if the camera would - just for once - show me the feet instead. And preferably the heels as they are going away!