Metafilm: Visual Storytelling in the Postmodern Age

Robert M. Rowan
Faculty: Christopher Brooks
Department of English

Audio-visual communication in the form of film and television has formed a language of its own, and this emergence begs both scholars and artists to put it to use in creative ways. The term “Metafilm” here refers to a film composed of other films, rather than a film about film. This paper proposes a set of technical and aesthetic guidelines and considerations for creating new stories from the existing film and video footage which informs much of our culture. This proposal, and others like it, must work toward balance between the conflicting ideas of private media ownership of, and public cultural ownership of, art and artistic expression.

1. Introduction

As books and television and films and technology intermingle and breed, new and sometimes remarkable hybrids are born. Anyone who grew up watching television or movies in America has a personal perception of culture and of language which strongly favors the audio-visual. Sound bites from film or television become quoted dialogue among friends or even among strangers, forming a sub-language which reflects a common cultural experience. The Metafilm concept represents an opportunity to draw upon the video version of *spiritus mundi*, the reservoir of shared cultural imagery, to tell new stories while deliberately connecting the viewer to their familiar past. It provides a latticework which allows the storyteller to work in multiple dimensions simultaneously. Short clips are chained together so that the dialogue in each clip advances a new scripted storyline. Like hyperlinks, these clips allow the viewer to branch off from the original story into a nostalgic mode from which they can return at any time.

Careful selection of clips can reward the experienced viewer and establish a larger thematic pattern or counter-narrative. Some legal and technical challenges exist, but Metafilm represents a refinement to the postmodern manifestation of interconnectedness known as the mash-up. Its low-cost nature gives artists of limited means the opportunity to push back against institutional encroachment upon the collective human experience and to reassert the right to use one’s common audio-visual culture to explore, explain, and enjoy that culture.

2. Proposed Process

The artistic intent behind the Metafilm is the creation of new narratives using pieces of existing public narratives. “Public” refers to film or television footage with a high nostalgic value, specifically that which is or was available to, consumed by, and incorporated into the culture of a reasonably large group. Private footage such as home movies would not generally serve this purpose. Unlike its ancestor the clip show, the Metafilm is made entirely of outside content and is not limited to footage from one show. Much as photos can be chosen based on color and shape to produce a larger mosaic image, the Metafilm can manipulate the qualities of existing material to create new experiences for the viewer. It would be possible and easier to assemble a random string of clips and create a Dadaist film with inscrutable meaning, but that would undermine the essence of this project. New and understandable meanings are primary among the desired results.

Each Metafilm is driven by a script, written with the intent of telling a complete and viable story. Access to suitable footage may constrict the project in some ways; however, the script need not be limited by the availability of actors, sets, or special effects. First-generation scripts will use dialogue as their primary mode of storytelling; character activity or body articulation, while not unimportant, will be less significant. Second-generation Metafilms will emerge as video indexing tools become more refined; this will allow the writer or director to find footage which matches the necessary dialogue and also provides some continuity of character motion, appearance, or activity.

Equal in importance to the script is the choice of footage. While any public footage may be considered fair game, footage which is pornographic, of poor quality, or too neutral (such as stock footage) should generally be avoided. The footage advances the script and also triggers memories in the viewer. It does not need to come from only the most popular films or television shows, but the viewer’s full enjoyment depends upon recognizing at least some of
the clips. A wide variety of sources improves the chances of attracting and retaining the viewer’s attention and enhances repeat screenings by providing the option to focus on the storyline or the clips. The ideal viewer response is to try to recall their memories of each clip. This provides many potential Easter eggs for any given viewer; those who have seen an obscure film or whose favorites make an appearance will feel especially rewarded for their efforts.

Within this broad range of possibilities, some potential patterns for the director to follow are worth mentioning. Continuity of age and gender: use voices from similar-sounding sources to minimize confusion over which scripted character is speaking. Judicious use of voice-tuning software may be helpful. This is especially important due to the lack of a specific visual marker signifying each character in the script. An alternate marker system may be useful for early productions when footage availability is low, such as a color-coded dot on the screen for each script-speaker.

Aspect ratio: footage should be selected from compatible video aspect ratios or cropped to fit a default aspect ratio.

Depth of field: footage characters who shift back and forth in the z-axis will excessively emphasize the necessary jump-cuts in the film; a base depth of field should be maintained for each scene.

Viewer generation: any available time period may yield useable footage, but focusing on a specific block of years allows the director to target or reward the generation for whom the footage will have prominent cultural significance. People who grew up in the 1950s will tend to appreciate different film, television, or even advertising clips than those who grew up in the 1970s. Ads can become culturally embedded as easily as any other type of presentation.

Body position: if a scene uses ten clips, and if script character A appears visually in those clips (rather than just aurally), the ideal selection of clips would present a fluid motion of the composite character on the screen. Truly fluid transitions between clips may depend upon advances in both editing software and video indexing capability. Heavy use of video morphing software will add excess frames and thus excess dialogue gaps between each clip.

The Metastory: this is the most difficult and potentially rewarding area for development; telling a story by stringing together pieces of dialogue is rudimentary in comparison. Each clip can serve both as a self-contained sign and as a stand-in for a larger sign; the larger signs thus invoked can also be pieced together to form a supporting narrative. Larger themes at work in a television episode or film are brought into play through a commonly-known piece of footage. Clips can be chosen based on compatibility of themes, character types, story moral, humorous or ironic juxtaposition, and so forth. This provides a potential third layer of meaning for the Metalfilm, the other two being the original storyline and the nostalgic treat that each clip may provide to the viewer.

Technical challenges: storage, availability, and indexing present the most significant challenges. Digitized video footage requires a sizeable storage capacity. Many TV shows and films are not yet available in a digital format. Some mechanism, most likely software-based, will need to be developed in order to index video footage by speech and other audio content, actor demographics (age, gender, race, and so on), and body articulation information.

3. Conclusions
The MetaFilm is an artistic project more than a commercial project, although some overlap exists. The film’s creator employs targeted nostalgia within cultural subgroups by selecting footage from the appropriate time period; a skilled director may select external sources whose presence particularly enhances the story being told, by invoking related or explanatory ideas or cultural history. A discussion on the legality of using video clips from so many copyrighted sources will clearly be necessary at some point. It may be that this project will serve as an impetus for reclaiming the “Fair Use” concept from corporate powers whose control of cultural content unfairly inhibits artistic development.