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Localizing Memory in Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood*

by Joanna Rance

Home movie images offer a rich archive of everyday life, but they do not speak for themselves. If they are to be anything more than triggers for nostalgia, or in the case of my family's footage – quaint and exotic objects or fascination – they require context. Their hidden meanings must be coaxed from the grainy images and washes of color. – Richard Fung (richardfung.ca)

This essay looks at the function of technology and its visual codes in Richard Fung's video memoir *Sea in the Blood* (2000). The dominant mediums Fung uses in the film are home videos and photographs. Within the context of the film, these mediums are used to evoke an emotional response from the audience. What makes the use of these mediums problematic however, is that a general audience would have no emotional association with the subjects – the people, places, and objects – featured in the home videos and photographs; there is nothing especially moving to an ordinary viewer about a boy they don't know playing in the snow, his mother at the airport, or a photograph of a truck. This suggests that the emotional response is not derived from the actual images that the audience sees, but from the medium specificity of home videos and old photographs. Fung ensures that the audience can relate to the videos and photographs on a personal level by drawing the audience's attention to their aesthetics – thereby disallowing the audience to be entirely sutured into the film and making the film open to their interpretation. Drawing on arguments raised in Umberto Eco's essay "Towards a Semiotic Inquiry into the Television Message," this essay argues that the home videos and photographs featured in Fung's *Sea in the Blood* rely on this sort of aberrant decoding by the viewer. In order to internalize the feelings that Fung emotes in the film, the audience must be able to localize the home videos and photographs – making them relevant to their own experiences. This is significant because it is through the audience's identification with the videos and photographs that their meanings become culturally relevant. As the audience relates more to the mediums than the actual images featured in the home videos and photographs, this essay will focus on the *technological* codes of those mediums and Fung's manipulation of them.

In his essay "Towards a Semiotic Inquiry into the Television Message," Umberto Eco states that "as is true of every system of signs, signs and their correlations are to be seen in relation to a sender and an addressee; based on a code supposed to be common to both; emitted in a context of communication which determines the meaning of the three previous terms" (238). In this statement, Eco raises an important point in the nature of communication: that in order for a communication to be successfully delivered and received, the system of signs must be commonly understood by both the sender and the addressee. This becomes an important issue when discussing the implications of codes being misunderstood, or understood in a different context then was initially intended by the sender. Eco defines this misinterpretation as 'aberrant decoding'. For Eco, aberrant decoding takes place in several instances: in "foreign people who didn't know that particular code", in "future generations, or people from a different culture who would superimpose a different code on the message", in "different hermeneutic traditions", and in "different cultural traditions, which understand the message as if it were based on their code rather than on that in which it was originally cast" (238-239). In these cases the

aberrant decoding is perceived as a mistake in communication because the code delivered by the sender is misread or misinterpreted by the addressee. But what if the aim of the sender is for the addressee to understand the message based on *their* own codes and *not* those of the sender in the first place? What if the sender *plans* for the addressee to localize the message rather than understand it from the sender's perspective? This is arguably the intention of Richard Fung in his video memoir *Sea in the Blood*.

In *Sea in the Blood*, Fung makes extensive use of home videos and old photographs of places he's visited and of his friends and family. Because the videos and photographs are personal to Fung there are no normative codes that the viewer can recall in order to decode the images and their meanings in the same way that Fung would read them. Similar issues of decoding are brought up in Eco's essay. Eco notes that:

> Semiotic research is...only one aspect of research: but it is essential for answering a question which, in plain words, could be put this way: 'When I send a message, what do different individuals in different environments actually receive? Do they receive the same message? A similar one? A totally different one?' (238)

For Eco, as for Fung, messages "transmitted to an undifferentiated mass of receivers" (239) should be handled differently than messages transmitted to "a well defined community of receivers" that would have "the same reading code as the [sender]" (238). When messages are conveyed via the mass media – such as Fung's film *Sea in the Blood* – the "transmitter of the message works within a communicative code which he knows *a priori* is not shared by all the receivers". As such, aberrant decoding becomes "the rule in the mass media" (238). Robert Rossen applies this idea to the film audience in his essay "*Something Strong Within* as Historical Memory". In the essay he suggests that spectators are memory workers; he writes:

> Spectators do not come to a film as empty vessels passively waiting to be filled. Rather, they are purposive social actors with specific cultural and historical baggage, and as a result the information and interpretations presented in a film become socially relevant only after they have been refracted through the idiosyncratic viewpoints of a diverse array of spectator groupings (116).

In this case, in order for the sender's message to be successfully interpreted by the receiver, an aberrant reading of the film's signs must be the purposeful means through which the receiver understands the message. For example, in *Sea in the Blood*, the messages Richard Fung wishes to impart on his audience only become meaningful when the audience internalizes the images he has put together into a film. Without the process of aberrant decoding, *Sea in the Blood* would merely be a collection of irrelevant images with no value except to Fung himself. In *Sea in the Blood*, Fung successfully conveys his message by planning for the audience's inability to decode the message in the same way he would, and by making aberrant decoding an essential part of the audience's reading of the film. The only way the audience can identify with Fung's film is through an aberrant reading – interpreting the film through their own codes, world-views, and personal experiences. However, because there are no shared ideologies between the subject matter of the videos and photographs and the viewer, Fung requires the viewer to associate

themselves not with the subjects of the videos and photographs, but with their medium specificities.

In "The Specificity of Media in the Arts" Noel Carroll writes "the medium-specificity thesis holds that each art form has its own domain of expression and exploration" (6). The expression and exploration unique to photography and home video are their evocation of nostalgic sentiments. Photography and film are, at their most basic, recording devices. The "nature of the medium" (Carroll 6) is the ability of video and photography to record reality on film. Furthermore, these recordings can then be reproduced and re-viewed over and over again, situating the two mediums within the domain of the reflective. The use of film and photography to record moments in time ties the two mediums to the kind of longing for the past that is central to nostalgia. Film's evocation of nostalgia is amplified with the advent of the "home" movie and photography, in which case the subject matter directly concerns something personal that the photographer or "filmmaker" wants to remember; in these instances, film and photography become tools for reminiscing. Home movies and photography are therefore a prime example of a medium that "pursue[s] *only* those effects which, in virtue of its medium, it excels in achieving" (Carroll 7), in the sense that everything about the physicality of home video and photography plays a role in the medium's intended effects. The specificities of home video and photography can be broken down into two categories: the physical medium of the camera, and the unique aesthetics related to that medium. These attributes of home video and photography are responsible for the viewer's nostalgic response to them.

The first specificity of home video and photography is the physical medium of the camera. The specificity thesis states that "each art form is assumed to have some range of effects that it discharges best or uniquely as a result of the structure of its physical medium" (Carroll 7). The most defining features of the home video camera and photographic camera are its small size, its mobility, and its ease of use. The significance of these three features is that they allow the camera to easily move into the realm of the home. The small size of the camera means it does not take up much room and is easily held (note the term handheld camera, often used to describe modern digital video cameras) – therefore it literally fits in the home or wherever the filmmaker or photographer may be. With this in mind, the camera's mobility means it can be brought from place to place without hassle; its maneuverability allows it to be moved freely and easily across spaces. Finally, the uncomplicated nature of these 'amateur' cameras suggests that anyone can use it – men and women, adults and children. Richard Fung brings up an interesting point in his own essay "Remaking Home Movies":

> As Patricia Holland notes in *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, "From the earliest days advertisements for the cameras have shown women behind the lens. This is, no doubt, a device to indicate how simple it is to take a snap"…Indeed, each of the Bell and Howell manuals that came with my family's camera and projector open with an image of a woman displaying the equipment. Whereas the technical aura of moviemaking might place this activity in the masculine sphere, its domestic role of producing family opens it to the arena of the feminine (31).

The fact that advertisements called attention to the simplicity of the camera suggests the importance of

this feature. The advertisements are arguably also implying the desirability of these cameras in the home, what Fung calls the camera's "domestic role". The domestic role of the camera solidifies it place in the home, therefore associating the medium with notions of the home such as family, stability, safety, togetherness etc.

The second specificity of home video and photography are its unique aesthetics. As mentioned earlier, home videos and photographs can be considered tools for reminiscing. To reminisce requires the memory in question to have occurred in the fairly distant past. Motifs of age, the "olden days", out-dated trends and fashions are inherent to reminiscing. The aesthetics of home videos and photographs also reflect these motifs in that the aesthetics represent images and technologies that have aged. As Richard Fung puts it, "in the digital age, the cracked emulsion and spots of pure color, blurry and vibrant all at once, point not only to something that is physically old, but also to an outmoded technology" (35). These sorts of aesthetics – grainy pictures and faded colors – impose of the past, through the old and out-dated look of the images. The aesthetic specificity of home videos and photographs fall into Eco's "aesthetic subcode," which, "acquires meaning according to aesthetic conventions" (245). Earlier in his essay Eco states: "you can…have the case that the receiver, perceiving a form without a meaning, and guessing from the context that it should have one, is able to deduce the code from the message itself" (244). This idea can be applied to the way that a viewer decodes someone else's home videos and personal photographs through aesthetic conventions. In this case, the form without a meaning would be the subject matter of the video or photograph, to which the viewer would have no association. However, due to the aesthetics of the videos or photographs, the viewer assumes that some meaning should be derived from the images – thus prompting them to interpret the images as they see fit.

In *Sea in the Blood*, the unique aesthetics of the home videos and photographs work especially well in contrast to the other medias used throughout the film. Most notably are the differences between the old footage – the home videos – and the new footage – the underwater sequences and footage of his mother gardening. The juxtaposition of new and old gives of a strong sense of a "now" and a "then." The aged, out-dated look of the old footage is emphasized when put next to recent, new-looking footage.

The medium specificity of home videos and photography work to stimulate the viewer's nostalgic sentiments and thus result in an emotional response to the image that the mediums produce. The physical structure of the "home" camera carries connotations of nostalgia in its ability to enter the home and record intimate moments. It also plays an important role in nostalgia and the act of reminiscing in that the nature of the camera allows it to record events and replay them at the viewers command. The aesthetic specificity of home videos and personal photographs are nostalgic in that they have the look of something from the past and signal thoughts of olden-days and fond memories. This sort of "aged" aesthetic has also been deeply romanticized, making it another important feature of nostalgia. It is through these physical and technological attributes of home videos and photographs that the viewer generates sentiments of nostalgia. Similarly, they are the attributes that Richard Fung relies upon and manipulates in *Sea in the Blood* in order to generate an emotional response from his audience and to give cultural and social meaning to his use of the home videos and photographs.

Returning to Robert Rossen's essay and the idea of the spectator as a 'memory worker,' Rossen goes on to say that there are two types of films: those that "seduce the spectator into becoming a passive recipient of the films point of view," and those that "simply provide information in a form as neutral and free of intention as possible, thereby leaving viewers completely free to do with it what they will" (117). Richard Fung's use of home video and photography in his film arguably falls somewhere in between these two extremes. Although Fung does provide information in a form that leaves the viewers free to interpret it as they please, he does not present this information neutrally. Therefore, to some degree Fung is seducing the spectator to ensure that they receive the message he desires. Although the audience is intended to read the videos and photographs according to their individual codes, Fung ensures that the message the audience receives in the end is that of the film – and Fung's – point of view.

Fung's form of seduction is the way in which he makes the audience aware of the physical mediums of the home videos and photographs. He achieves this through manipulating how the audience sees these visuals on the screen. For example, Fung starts the film by showing the viewer photographs from his travels, and he literally *shows* them; the photographs are presented in the form of a slide. The viewer is able to see the physical slide itself, not just the photograph. In fact the slide tends to dominate over the photograph, taking up a majority of the frame. Similarly, later on in the film Fung films a slideshow, emphasizing the transition between slides and the sounds of the slide projector. Filmed footage and filmed photographs are also manipulated; they are rarely – if ever – left in their natural state. Fung uses slow motion, shaky camera movements, superimposition, and after effects (graphics and words placed over the images) to alter the audiences experience of these sequences. By manipulating the mediums, Fung does not allow the audience to be sutured into the film. If the audience were to associate with the subject matter of the videos or photographs, Fung intercepts by making the audience aware that they are watching a film and – more specifically – home videos and personal photographs. In this manner the audience is encouraged to do an aberrant reading of the two mediums. Using their knowledge of the medium specificities and technological codes of home video and photography, the audience is able to localize and internalize the feelings that Fung is emitting through the use of those mediums.

At the most basic level, the home videos and photographs featured in *Sea in the Blood* are used to generate an emotional response from the audience. In order to achieve this however, the audience must associate themselves on an emotional level with the videos and photographs. As the audience has nothing in common with the subject matter, they must associate with the medium specificities of the home videos and photographs. To ensure that the audience is able to relate to the mediums of the home videos and photographs, Fung draws the audience's attention to the physicality of the mediums, not allowing the audience to be sutured into the film, and thus allowing them to read the film by their own codes. The audience is then able to internalize the meanings of the videos and photographs and receive the overarching messages of Richard Fung's film. Umberto Eco suggests that "the problem of communication is an ideological problem and not merely a technical matter" (240). Based on an analysis of the uses of technology in Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood*, this essay explains that problems surrounding communication can in fact revolve around technical matters.

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