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Becoming aware of cinematic techniques in propaganda: Instructional support by cueing and training

Martin Merkt [a, *], Florian Sochatzy [b]

[a] Knowledge Media Research Center, Schleichstr. 6, 72076 Tuebingen, Germany
[b] University of Eichstaett-Ingolstadt, Universitaetsallee 1, 85072 Eichstaett, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Cinematic techniques are used to induce biased interpretations of historical videos. Therefore, awareness of these techniques is necessary when working with videos as historical sources. Two studies investigated the effects of training and cueing on the analysis of propaganda. Whereas training benefitted the identification and interpretation of cinematic techniques in propaganda, cueing cinematic techniques on a category level (e.g., camera angle) resulted in less specific analyses with regard to identifying the techniques and hardly affected the interpretation of the techniques' effects. In contrast, more specific manifestation cues (e.g., low angle shot) resulted in more specific analyses and positively affected giving correct interpretations of the cinematic techniques' effects. Interestingly, the effects of cueing were not just observed for practice clips, which included cues, but transferred to test clips, which did not include cues. Overall, these studies constitute a starting point for investigating the effects of cueing on the analysis of propaganda.

1. Introduction

The interpretation of events is not just framed by the contents of a message but also by the way the message is composed. This manuscript will focus on the use of cinematic techniques such as camera angle and distance in videos. Given the importance of videos as primary and secondary sources in history (e.g., Butler, Zaromb, Lyle, & Roediger, 2009; Stoddard & Marcus, 2010; Umanath, Butler, & Marsh, 2012), taking into account the implicit effects of cinematic techniques has to be considered a central component of historical literacy (Schreiber, 2007). In this process, it is crucial that students learn to separate the contents of a message from the techniques that are used to convey that message. The reported studies will address the question whether training and cueing are efficient in helping students to identify the use of specific cinematic techniques and to give correct interpretations of the intended effects of these techniques.

1.1. Historical reasoning

Historical reasoning refers to the act of forming an understanding of past events based on historical sources (e.g., van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008; Wineburg, 1991). According to Schreiber (2007), historical reasoning encompasses dealing with history in a reflected and (self-)reflexive way. History is hereby seen as an intentional construction of individuals. To deal with history therefore means dealing with the intentions behind the narrations. In this process, historians use texts, pictures, charts, and videos. There are three heuristics that experts use to make sense of multiple historical documents (Wineburg, 1991). First, they corroborate information from one document with information from other documents (*corroboration*). Second, they consider meta-information about the source when interpreting its contents (*sourcing*). Third, they check the plausibility of the reported events based on prior knowledge (*contextualization*).

According to the *sourcing* heuristic, it is necessary to attend to the sources' characteristics when interpreting their contents (Britt & Aglinskas, 2002; Rouet, Britt, Mason, & Perfetti, 1996; Rouet, Favart, Britt, & Perfetti, 1997; van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008). Learners must judge whether a source might be biased. In this process, apart from looking at the authors' credentials, experts consider style to evaluate sources (Britt & Aglinskas, 2002). Being

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: m.merkt@iwm-kmrc.de (M. Merkt), florian.sochatzy@ku.de (F. Sochatzy).

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aware of techniques used to induce biased interpretations may thus empower students to engage in successful sourcing. Moreover, identifying respective techniques should raise students' awareness of a document's subtext. According to Wineburg (1994, 1998), subtext is a central component of historians' mental representations of sources and incorporates the authors' goals.

Videos are a valuable source for historical reasoning (Stoddard & Marcus, 2010); however, cinematic techniques such as camera angle, camera distance, music, and source of text can be used to guide the audiences' interpretation of the depicted events (see Section 1.2). Given these potential effects, videos were frequently used as propaganda, for example, during the Third Reich (Baird, 1983; Raack, 1986). In this regard, Hinton (2000) thoroughly described the use of cinematic techniques in various films of Leni Riefenstahl. Consequently, teaching students about the effects of cinematic techniques can be considered an important component of 21st century (history) education. Importantly, the use of corresponding techniques is not limited to propaganda but is also prevalent in other media such as advertising or political videos (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999; Meyers-Levy & Peracchio, 1992).

1.2. The effects of cinematic techniques

Please note that this section is not comprehensive and focuses only on the cinematic techniques that were covered in the reported studies: camera angle, camera distance, music, and source of text. Please refer to Fig. 1 for an illustration of different camera angles and camera distances.

With regard to camera angle, high angle shots are contrasted with eye-level shots and low angle shots. In high angle shots, the camera is placed above eye level, whereas the camera is situated below eye level in low angle shots. Kraft (1987) noted that low angle shots resulted in more positive and powerful evaluations than high angle shots.

The camera's position can also be varied regarding the camera's distance to the scene. It is assumed that close-up shots are associated with more intimacy, a stronger focus on emotions, and more involvement (Balazs, 1952; Bousé, 2003; Doane, 2003). In a study by Bucy and Newhagen (1999), close-up shots resulted in more positive valence towards the protagonist, whereas shots from a larger distance de-emphasized individual entities, resulting in less emotional involvement. In a more artificial setting, Williams and Bargh (2008) observed that inducing spatial distance resulted in less emotional involvement.

Music is assumed to influence recipients' interpretations. Imagine a person leaning against the railing of a balcony and another person secretly approaching that person from behind. Depending on whether there is romantic or suspenseful background music, recipients' interpretation of the same scene may vary. Demonstrating the effects of music, Bullerjahn and Güldenring (1994) found that music indeed influences viewers' interpretations of ambiguous situations so that their interpretations align with the type of music. Moreover, moving music reduces the recipients' critical approach to ads (Strick, de Bruin, de Ruiter, & Jonkers, 2014).

Finally, the source of the text might influence a recipient's interpretation of information. Literary theory postulates that narrators not personally involved in ongoing events are considered more omniscient than narrators or protagonists that are involved in the events (e.g., Stanzel, 1989).

1.3. Supporting students to be aware of cinematic techniques

The use of specific cinematic techniques (i.e., camera angle) is hardly encoded in memory (Kraft, 1987). Providing learners with training about the effects of cinematic techniques could be a promising approach to support the identification of techniques. In a related area, Butler and colleagues (Butler et al., 2009; Umanath et al., 2012) noted that learners tend to remember misinformation in videos as correct information even if the misinformation is contrasted with correct information in texts. However, giving

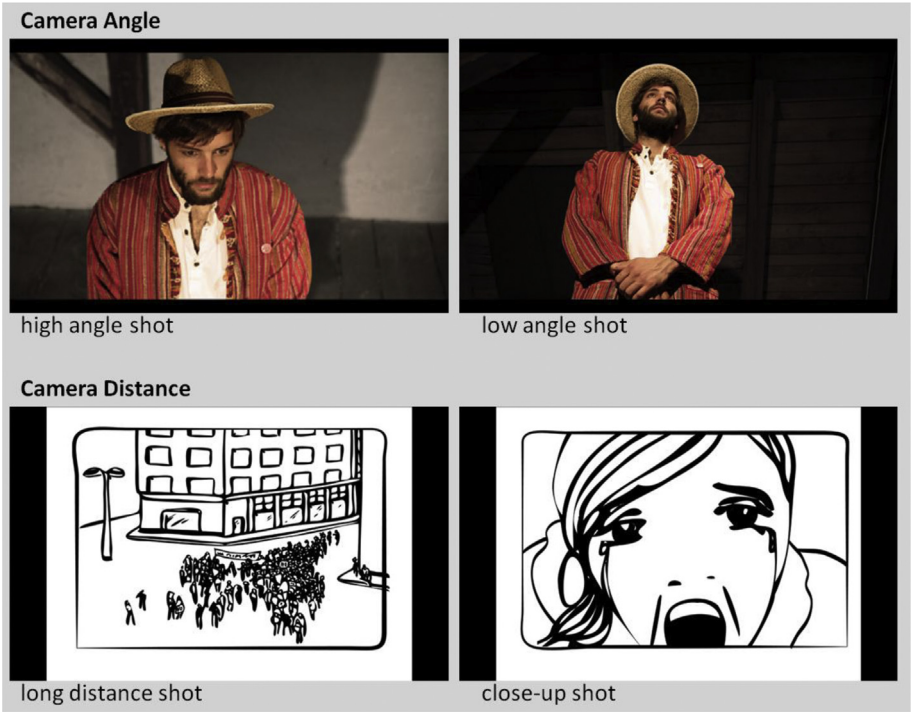

Fig. 1. Different manifestations of camera angle and camera distance. The pictures are taken from the “cinematic techniques” training session used in both studies.