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Camera Angles in Television News

Designed to Communicate?

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Introduction: Camera angles and theory

This chapter discusses the theory surrounding the semiotic resource of 'camera angles' and examines the consequences of bringing theoretical categories into contact with a diverse body of actually broadcast images. I start with an outline of the accepted – if we understand repeated appearance in academic work as a mark of acceptance – theoretical understandings of camera angles. Real-world camera positioning can be descriptively complex, and it is conventional to see camera angles as resolvable along two perpendicular axes, the horizontal and vertical planes dealt with in this study.

Vertical angle and 'power'

The convention of using variations in vertical camera angle, that is, whether an image presents a (generally) human subject from above or below their own eye level, as an indication of the power-relation between viewer and object is perhaps the best known of any aspect of visual expression, and its interpretation forms part of the 'accepted knowledge' of image production.

> By controlling the viewer's positioning vis-a-vis the characters, objects, or events in an image, including the image sequences of film or television, the image's producer can elicit responses that have been conditioned by the viewer's experience of equivalent interre-lationships with real-life people, things, and actions. This kind of analogical connection is probably most clearly evident in the well-worn cliche [*sic*] of filming someone from a lower angle to make her or him appear more imposing [...] [Camera positioning is] a variable

that is in virtually constant use in many movies and TV programs. It is one of the principal visual means for such effects as heightening the intensity of a scene as it moves towards its climax, maintaining the viewer's sympathy with the hero and emotional distance from secondary characters, or releasing the tension of a scene or of the movie as a whole following the resolution of the action, etc.

(Messaris 1998: 4)

The convention of using vertical angle to denote relationships of power is well established in visual expression. The subject seen from a high angle is generally understood as being portrayed in a position of relative powerlessness. Likewise, a portrayed participant we 'look up to' may be seen as having some power over us. Echoing such earlier writers as Metallinos (1996: 226–227), Messaris (1998) suggests this convention may have its ultimate origins in the analogical relationship between child and parent; the child necessarily views adults, those with the authority to determine the course of many fundamental aspects of the child's life (such as when food will be available, when it will be time to wake up and time to rest), from a low angle and 'looks up to' them. However, basing interpretations on psychological analogs is not so straightforward. As well as being a source of authority, power and control, the parent is also a source of love, tenderness and protection. If one assumes an experiential basis for the 'low-angle ≈ authority' convention, then one might also reasonably add an interpretation of low-angle portrayals as showing the portrayed as a source of affection and protection as well.

Whichever particular interpretation we end up choosing, an understanding of the importance of camera angles as a potential means of expression is shared by academics, critics and, crucially, practitioners. The influence of camera angle on audience perception is commonly acknowledged by manuals; for example:

Where you place your camera, relative to a subject, will have a strong influence on what it looks like to your audience, and how they feel about it. [...] Looking down at any subject tends to make it look less impressive than looking up at it. Although steeply angled viewpoints are usually too dramatic for most purposes, even a slight variation from an eye-level position can affect the impact of a subject.

(Millerson 2001: 56)

But, as film theorists Bordwell and Thompson (1993: 213) point out, it is far from being the case that 'framing from a low angle "says" that

a character is powerful and that framing from a high angle presents him or her as dwarfed and defeated' is an absolute rule. Given that this expressive possibility is widely acknowledged, it is probably also most easily *avoided* by those who might wish to do so. Factual television, thoroughly imbued with an ideology that includes objectivity as an ideal, presumably will attempt to present 'facts' whilst avoiding any type of expression which might be seen as 'opinion'. Thus it might be expected, given this self-consciousness, that news visuals will largely and purposefully *avoid* use of such potentially value-judgement-laden image-making techniques. Yet, in order to make television, the camera must be placed somewhere.

It should also be borne in mind that there are physical 'real-world' factors which affect an image-maker's ability to make use of the camera angle as a 'semiotic resource'. Taking an acceptable (relatively stable, infocus, well-lit) low-angle shot is nearly always an available option – the camera operator merely has to squat, resting the camera on a knee, or on the ground – whereas a high-angle shot, which requires the camera to be above the eyeline of the object, may not be possible in all situations; there may be nothing around to stand on, and/or the camera operator may not be strong enough or dexterous enough to operate the camera proficiently with it held over the head. The image-maker is working in a physical as well as an expressive space.

Horizontal angle and 'involvement'

Differences in the horizontal angle from which a subject is shown have been interpreted as implying relationships of relative detachment or involvement with the portrayed subject. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 134–140) suggest that this can be assessed by looking at the coincidence of the frontal plane of the camera and that of the depicted. Elsewhere this subject receives comparatively little attention in the academic literature and when it is mentioned it is often only in the context of the formal interview when the idea of 'the line' (and, more importantly, not crossing it!) is discussed as a piece of basic production knowledge (Millerson 2001: 72–73).

One of the few works that does go further than offering practical advice is Fiske and Hartley's *Reading Television* (1978) which, while generally avoiding any comment on purely pictorial aspects of television, does propose a link between horizontality and perceptions of speaker reliability and expertise:

if a speaker is televised in half profile, the shot tends to be decoded as being of a more reliable and expert figure than if the speaker is

televised full face. Television normally shows 'expert' interviewees in half profile talking to an interviewer, whereas performers or news-readers (who present other people's knowledge) are shot full-face.

(Fiske and Hartley 1978: 62)

However, let us take apart the reasoning behind this. Outside contributors (i.e. those individuals not employed by the broadcaster or producer) are conventionally not allowed to address the camera directly, so their contributions must be mediated through an insider by means of an interview; the conventional way to shoot interviews is as a conversation with interviewer and interviewee consistently facing each other; the net result is that outsiders (often sought for their 'expert' views) are generally seen in half-profile; the linkage between half-profile images and expertise is thus established, and anyone so portrayed can partake of the aura of 'expertness' associated with it. It can thus be seen that the cause of the linkage of image to interpretation resides in the convention of eliciting expert contributions via the medium of the face-to-face interview, rather than something inherent in the nature of the half-profile shot itself. If the convention was that expert contributions were, for instance, shot in a darkened room, we could, following the same reasoning, expect an association of expertness with 'dark interviews'.

Fiske was writing in 1978 when the satellite or land-line link-up between remote location and studio was not the commonplace it is now. I would suggest that this conventional association of half-profile shot with expertise has been weakened – perhaps to the point of extinction – by both the routine presentation of 'expert' interviewees via a 'link'[1] shot full-face, and the routine use of 'non-expert' interviews, 'vox pops', street interviews with eye-witnesses and so on. Fiske's observation may have been useful in 1978 but given changes in production techniques, use of his interpretation some decades later may be problematic. My analysis thus concentrates on the more general interpretation offered by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 134–140).

In this view variations in the horizontal angle from which social actors are portrayed are seen as depicting the degree to which the portrayer considers them to be 'involved' with 'us':

The horizontal-angle encodes whether the image-producer (and hence, willy-nilly, the viewer) is 'involved' with the represented participants or not. The frontal angle says, as it were, 'What you see here is part of our world, something we are involved with.' The oblique

angle says 'What you see here is *not* part of our world; it is their world, something we are not involved with.'

(Kress and Leeuwen 2006: 136, original emphasis)

To summarise: despite the readings of vertical and horizontal camera angles suggested by individual scholars showing a degree of variation, and more or less subtlety of interpretation, it can be said that there is general agreement on the potential influence of camera angles as semiotic resources, and furthermore that variations in vertical angle refer to values along an 'empowerment–disempowerment' dimension, and – though there is much less consistency and agreement here – that variations in horizontal angle index the degree of 'involvement' between viewer and portrayed.

Methodology

In order to begin to assess the usefulness of the ideas which deal with camera angles as an expressive feature of images, the first step must be to identify and isolate a population of the images which share the attributes under consideration. If we want to consider the discursive implications of certain camera angles we must first identify the circumstances of their appearance, and when and if they do appear, understand with what sort of frequency and in what context. If it turns out that the phenomena we theorise as significant are actually 'freak' or 'extreme' events, then we may need to change the focus of our analysis in order to reach a valid understanding of the reality of the television viewing experience.

The content analysis described here was designed to create data which describes the camera angles that would be encountered in the course of viewing television news. The material used is drawn from the recording of two national public service broadcasters, the BBC in the UK and *Nihon Hoso Kyokai* (NHK, also sometimes known as the Japan Broadcasting Corporation, JBC) in Japan. This choice was partly pragmatic, as the two sources most reliably available to the author, and partly influenced by a desire to expose theory to a broad range of real-world material. The content analysis performed is admittedly a rather blunt tool, but the initial move of simply looking at images in the context of the stories in which they appear seems to be a very necessary first step in approaching an appreciation of the validity of the theoretical categories currently available to analysts of television images.

Table 3.1 Coding scheme

Vertical			Horizontal		
	very high angle	2		full face	0
	high angle	1		half profile	1
	eye level	0		full profile	2
	low angle	−1		rear	3
	very low angle	−2			

Images were assigned two simple values, one for horizontal and one for vertical camera angle,[2] according to the coding scheme shown in Table 3.1. It should be emphasised that this simple coding scheme is very far from ideal. While coding horizontal angle was reliant on certain visual cues (the visibility or otherwise of both eyes or ears for example), the coding of vertical images is far more problematic and, except in the relatively uncommon 'very high' and 'very low' categories, to some extent dependent on subjective understandings of what the image is an image 'of', and where 'eye level' seems to be. As a general rule, images where the subjects' eyes, as portrayed, were seen to be significantly above those of any individuals standing on the same level behind them, were coded 'low angle', and vice versa. Obviously this rule of thumb is not applicable in all, perhaps even the majority of, situations.

Images were drawn from a corpus of news stories taken from recordings of NHK and BBC news programming in three periods between 2006 and 2013; each still image represents a single cut. This image corpus was derived from edited general news stories, in industry terminology 'packages', of between two and four minutes in duration. This limitation was imposed first, to eliminate packages too short to develop their own visual flow, and second, to avoid the difficulty sometimes encountered in identifying individual 'stories' when they appear in a lengthy flow of uninterrupted video material. NHK sometimes covers major stories with such segments which incorporate smaller sections covering different aspects of the same story. A total of 50 stories were used, 25 from each broadcaster, and the corpus ultimately consisted of 1,081 cuts. Not all cuts could be coded in a meaningful way – for example, it would have made little sense to code two-dimensional graphics, or images consisting primarily of documents and other non-human objects. Although exact numbers varied across categories and broadcasters, about 65–70 per cent of images were found to be codeable. Cuts that were not deemed codeable were those which, for example, did not portray any human subjects, or those where there were wide variations in camera angle, for

instance pans which follow an individual as they walk by and which can, in the course of a single cut, move from a full-face portrayal to an image which shows the back of the subject's head as they walk away.

Results

The distributions of the different values for vertical and horizontal camera angles are shown in Tables 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3.[3] As can be seen from the figures presented in Table 3.4 the most common shots (23.4 per cent of all coded cuts) are those which view the subject from directly in front and at eye level. This can be taken as the 'default' – possibly, the ideal – camera-to-subject relationship. An interpretation of this view from the theoretical perspective outlined earlier would characterise it as 'power neutral' – the viewer is placed at eye level as regards the portrayed subject, neither above nor below, neither in a dominant nor submissive attitude – and 'fully involved', the portrayed represented by the image producer as being fully 'part of our world'. The result can be dismissed as trivial but it provides an invaluable perspective when we come to consider the less common, and more interesting, uses of certain of the more potentially meaning-laden camera angles.

In its use of camera angles then, we would have to conclude that television news's visual presentation of social actors often seems to
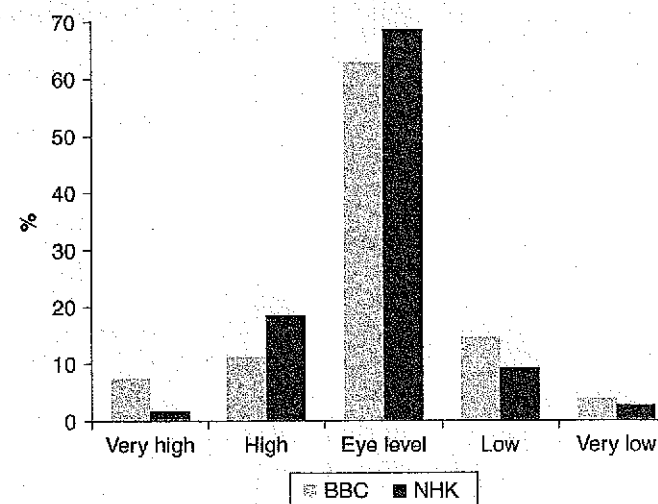

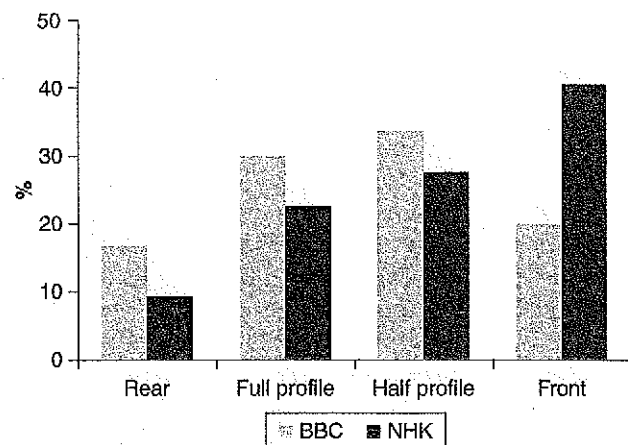*Figure 3.1* Distribution of vertical camera angles

Figure 3.2   Distribution of horizontal camera angles

Table 3.2   Distribution of vertical camera angles

	BBC		NHK	
	n	%	n	%
Very high	26	7.3	6	1.6
High	40	11.3	70	18.3
Eye level	223	62.8	263	68.7
Low	52	14.6	35	9.1
Very low	14	3.9	9	2.3
Total	355	100	383	100

Table 3.3   Distribution of horizontal camera angles

	BBC		NHK	
	n	%	n	%
Full face	62	19.9	139	40.4
Half profile	105	33.7	95	27.6
Full profile	93	29.8	78	22.7
Rear	52	16.7	32	9.3
Total	312	100	344	100

Table 3.4   Cross-tabulation of distribution of cuts taken from varying vertical and horizontal camera angles, BBC and NHK combined total

	Very high		High		Eye level		Low		Very low		Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Full face	1.1	7	3.5	23	23.4	152	2.5	16	0.5	3	30.9	201
Half profile	0.5	3	3.9	25	20.5	133	4.9	32	0.9	6	30.7	199
Full profile	0.8	5	4.6	30	16.8	109	3.1	20	1.2	8	26.5	172
Rear	0.9	6	1.1	7	8.8	57	0.5	3	0.6	4	11.8	77
Total	3.5	21	13.1	85	69.3	451	10.9	71	3.2	21	100	649

approach the objective ideal it ostensibly aspires to (putting aside for one moment any reasonable doubts we might have about the potential for objectivity of *any* image) showing the broad variety of social actors it deals with, male and female, old and young, senior members of government and factory workers, in a broadly power-neutral manner. We might, if we were ideologically so inclined, look beyond this initial impression and interpret this standpoint as a manoeuvre on the part of the mass media to obscure the power relationships in which they themselves are involved, and their influential position in society. As Freeman points out, in order to carry out the roles of provider of information and political watchdog the media take upon themselves, they 'must locate themselves within the political and economic centers of state power' (2000: 3). The mass media must face both ways: they must have an outward-facing audience identity which presents an image consistent with the former roles and an inward-facing identity which it utilises in its dealings with other elite groups within society. It may be necessary for this latter identity to remain concealed from the audience if the former is to remain serviceable. Herbert Gans, referring to the US, suggests that the professional identity and values of journalists there are built on a tacit acknowledgement of the power hierarchy in which they work:

> They work with apolitical source considerations that are nevertheless sensitive to political power; they apply product considerations that professionalize the commercial imperatives of their firms; they practice value exclusion that similarly professionalizes the avoidance of judgments which could upset the powerful; and in the process, they hide the existence of power even from themselves.
>
> (Gans 1980: 284)

As well as any possible ideological reason the mass media might have for consistently representing the social actors they portray in this way, there may also exist other sound reasons. It is this 'neutral' point of view that most closely approximates an ideal everyday interpersonal interaction: an individual of roughly average height will roughly be at eye level when standing talking to another similarly sized individual; they will generally face one another and doing so will optimise the visual availability of communicational material, movements of the mouth, facial expressions, direction of gaze and, initially, identity (Wieser, Pauli, Alpers and Mühlberger 2008). A clear view of the eyes is particularly important in regulating the smooth flow of conversation (ibid.: 93). Indeed any interpretation of the images created by news media industries needs to take

into account the fact that they are produced by real, physical human beings working in real, physical spaces, generally with quite definite pragmatic goals in mind.

Discussion

Horizontal variations

As can be seen from Figure 3.2, the distribution of horizontal angles across the two broadcasters is largely similar in contour, except for the 'full face' category; where NHK material exhibits a continuing increase and the BBC shows a marked decrease. NHK uses proportionately twice as many full-face portrayals. Overall both full-face and half-profile portrayals make up slightly over 30 per cent of coded images, full-profile images make up somewhat less (26 per cent) and images of people from the rear just under 13 per cent.

Taking Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) suggested interpretation (see 'Horizontal angle and involvement' section above) at face value, we would conclude that there is a difference in the degree of 'involvement' between subjects as portrayed by NHK and NHK's viewers, and those portrayed by the BBC and the BBC's viewers. Assuming a simple linear relation between increasing frontality and increasing engagement we could also conclude that NHK's presentation of human subjects implies a relationship where subject and viewer are more fully 'part of the same world'(Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 136). By comparison to the BBC news audience, do viewers of NHK experience a televised world which positions them as more closely 'engaged' with portrayed social actors? A comparative study of framing sizes, interpreted as an index of 'social distance', concludes similarly that 'NHK's typical portrayal can be interpreted as portraying a closer relationship between viewer and viewed while the BBC is rather more "distant", perhaps stereotypically "stand-offish"' (Koga-Browes 2013: 86). Another possible interpretation might be that BBC image-makers are simply more tolerant of images which are further from the ideal, perhaps indicating that providing viewers with an image that allows them to view the whole of the subject's face is less important in the UK than in Japan.

Vertical variations

This study, through the coding process, has resulted in a collection of images which can be viewed (if we accept the notion that image features are semiotic resources) as realisations on the material plane of the meanings intended by the producers. However, we have also seen that in

interpreting texts we must acknowledge the fact that they are the result of what social semiotics calls 'regimes of production' (Hodge and Kress 1988: 4–8), which take into account the real processes and circumstances of the creation of the text. So, (a) to what degree can we interpret images as the realisations of semiotic resources by communication-oriented individuals or bodies, and (b) what is the extent of the influence of the physical circumstances and process of creation? The following sections try to consider images not purely as expressive vehicles but, in part at least, as a concrete consequence of a material process. Before starting, though, it is important to point out that close to two-thirds of images were coded as 'eye level', that is, shot from neither above nor below, neither high-angle nor low (see Figure 3.1). Thus the discussion below concerns a minority of the television news images typically encountered by viewers. Moving on to deal with some of the actual images that make up the research sample, what follows deals in particular with one type of image – that which diverges from the 'standard' eye-level representation of the world – as illustrative of alternative interpretations, often unrelated to the readings proposed by theoreticians, that may cast a different light. The following sections suggest a few of the types of motivation that may have applied in the creation of some of the images encountered. These types should not be considered definitive or exclusive but as a set of prompts useful in considering the images of television news.

Alternative interpretations

The images used here illustrate the diversity of images found in the corpus and hint at the variety of motivations behind the camera operators' decisions to portray the subject from the chosen angle. These images can be divided into a number of broad groups based on a consideration of various aspects of the actual circumstances within which the image was created, and in some cases, the subject matter of the image.

Positional motivation

This refers to images of objects or people where the camera operator is unable, because of the limitations of time and physical surroundings, to be on the same level as the object. For example, Figure 3.3 shows part of a sequence of a young girl, deeply worried by a recent earthquake, at the top of the stairs of the family home after getting out of bed to seek reassurance from her mother; either there was no time for the camera operator to go upstairs to take the shot, or it may have been inappropriate given the circumstances. Figure 3.4 shows the then leader of the Komeito political party, Ota Hiroaki, addressing a crowd of supporters

Figure 3.3   NHK low-angle shot of girl at top of stairs: Positional motivation

Figure 3.4   NHK low-angle shot of campaigning politician: Positional motivation

from the top of a campaign bus. As is often the case in Japanese political campaigning, the vehicle used is fairly small and there would be little room for a camera operator as well as the candidate, even if permission to shoot from the roof of the bus could be gained from the Komeito organisers. Thus the pictures are from ground level.[4]

The BBC image shown in Figure 3.5 is another example: this image is part of a heavily modulated,[5] 'generic' sequence which shows police breaking down a door as part of their anti-terrorist activities. It seems as if the camera operator has chosen to portray this event (probably staged for the camera) from a raised position in the stairwell or hallway outside the door in question; s/he is probably standing on the stairs looking down at the scene and thus able to capture an overview. There
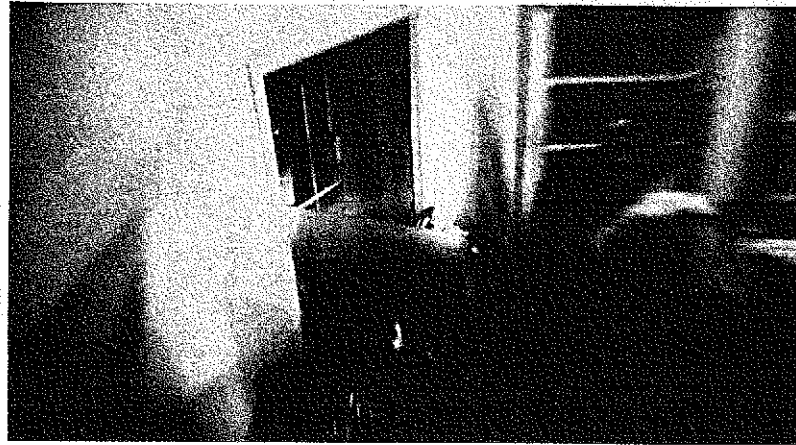
Figure 3.5 High-angle BBC shot of police: Possible positional motivation

may have been a practical explanation for the choice of camera angle, for instance there may not have been physical space for the operator to stand safely at the same level as the police in the landing. Sometimes the angle of the shot is determined merely by the physical space within which the camera operator and the subject find themselves. However, technical considerations cannot rule out the fact that the images can be read as intentionally constructed. Whether or not we read them this way largely depends on our analytical standpoint: if our emphasis is on trying to understand 'what the broadcaster was trying to say' then these practicalities should be taken into account; if, however, our interest is in the audience reception of these visual messages then they become far less important.

Relational motivation

These images attempt to illustrate not the objects or social actors portrayed but the *relationship* between them. As an example, in Japan where summer temperatures can reach 40°C, a regularly recurring image is of 'people under the sun' (e.g. Figure 3.6), that is, ordinary people suffering the effects of very hot summer weather. In these images it is not the sky or the sun that is the object of interest, nor is it the passers-by as individuals; it is the relationship between the two determining the shared condition of being human in temperatures of 40° and more. A related image is Figure 3.7: this shows the relationship between a group of tourists, waiting in the sweltering summer heat in the town
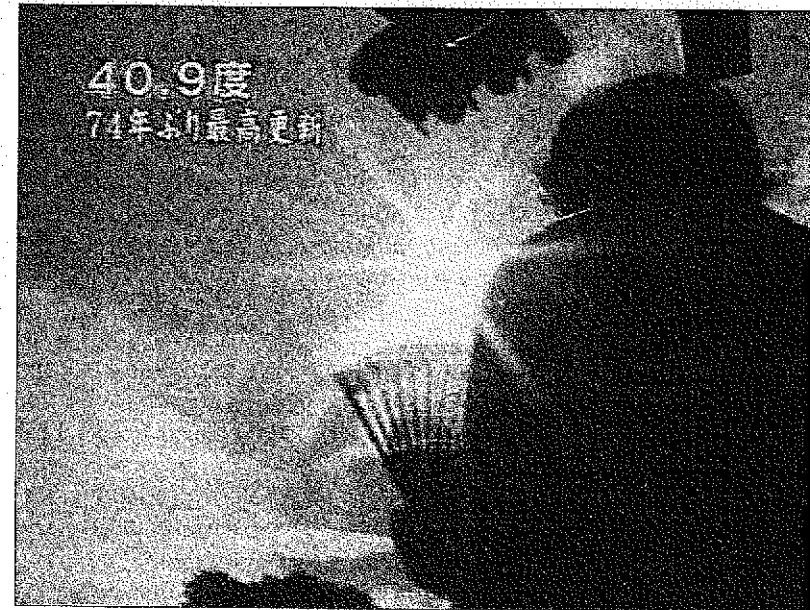
Figure 3.6 Relational low-angle shot: People and sun

Figure 3.7 Relational low-angle shot: Visitors with fan

hall of Miyazaki Prefecture in the south of Japan to catch a glimpse of celebrity mayor Higashikokubaru Hideo, with the small fan (shown in part on the right-hand side of the image) placed on the floor in the foyer of the building. The fan is significant in the context of the story as

it symbolises the money-saving activities of Higashikokubaru's administration, who have decided to turn off the building's air conditioning despite the high temperatures.

Another image in the sample shows (or purports to show) the moment electricity is restored to a family home after being cut off in the wake of an earthquake. The return of power is illustrated by the family gathering in the home's main room for the mother to switch on the light on the ceiling. The important elements in understanding the situation are *the family* and *the illuminated electric light*.

Technical motivation

Another reason to move away from the 'standard view' can perhaps be found in the limitations of the technology used in image creation, for example in the image shown in Figure 3.8. This is taken from a BBC story covering a new development in pain-relief technology which has been useful in alleviating the patient's chronic back pain, allowing him to begin to walk again, even if with crutches. The shoot took place in the fairly limited space of a hospital treatment room. Both the nature of the material to be portrayed and the nature of the work space may be factors in the creation of an image which, interpreted naively, might be construed as disempowering. An attempt to capture the recovering patient's first steps as the new treatment took effect and the expression of relief and happiness on his face, combined with the difficulty of taking a shot wide enough to create a full-length portrayal of the patient, have

Figure 3.8   Foreshortening used to increase pictorial scope

led the camera operator to opt for a shot which utilises foreshortening to squeeze more information into a limited framing space. A camera placement which creates an angle – the more acute, the greater the effect – between the frontal planes of the object and the camera lens can thus bypass the technical limitations imposed by the image-creation equipment.

One might also place in this category the common high-angle images of parliamentary debates and politicians' statements that often appear in BBC packages;[6] the position of the eight cameras that provide the images are regulated by a parliamentary committee. There are 'technical' reasons for the cameras' positions being around the edges of the gallery and not at floor level within the chamber, as the movement of remote-controlled cameras could be 'potentially distracting for the person speaking and those nearby' (UK Parliament Administration Committee 2012). These cameras all look down into the chamber, the result being that while the angles they provide are felt to be less than satisfactory (ibid.), they result in parliamentary proceedings which are universally seen by television viewers from a 'high' or 'very high' angle.

Many of the non-eye-level shots encountered are in some degree under the influence of one or more of the motivations above, but there are some examples in the corpus which exhibit quite specific motifs.

The shape of human beings: Hands and head

Figure 3.9 shows a senior politician, Ota Akihiro, this time shaking hands with supporters at an outdoor rally. Why has the camera operator chosen to capture this particular image? We might put it down to

Figure 3.9   Low-angle shot showing politician shaking hands

the fact that the individual portrayed is a powerful politician (leader of the junior party in the ruling coalition) and the image-maker is choosing to mobilise the semiotic resource of the low camera angle to make him seem more imposing. However, looking at the whole of the 3.9 second cut, it seems more likely that this was an attempt to foreground the hand-shaking between Ota and the crowd, putting the camera below the level of the outstretched hands to include them in the image along with Ota.[7] Nevertheless, we are left with the fact that the image, whatever the motivation behind this particular form, was chosen for use in the final broadcast version of the story. That it was not rejected because of its potential semiotic content, that is the implication of a relationship of power/subordination between the powerful portrayed (politician) and subjected viewer (voter), can be seen either as an indication of insensitivity to, or lack of understanding of, this potential meaning of the image; or as a collective acknowledgement that this image, with all its semiotic implications, is appropriate in this context.

However, the story from which the image is extracted consists of 28 cuts, 21 of which portray Mr Ota on screen for 192 of the total 232 second duration of the story. Such prominence given to a single individual, along with the fact that we are told he is leader of a political party, would seem to make the relatively weak visual communication of one image shot from a low angle almost superfluous. During the course of the story he is portrayed from a high or very high angle six times and from a low or very low angle three times. If we attribute to these cuts their conventional semiotic meaning, we should conclude that Ota is portrayed overall as being in a rather less powerful position with respect to the viewer. As a politician, a 'public servant', we could indeed argue that this is an accurate reflection of his actual position; however, the mere duration of his exposure (conventionally implying 'importance') seems to argue in the other direction. It can be seen that the various portrayals shown in the story, if given their traditional semiotic interpretations, do not add up to a consistent statement about the individual portrayed, and consequently it is difficult to conclude incontrovertibly that the images 'tell' us anything about him.

Figure 3.10 shows an image from a BBC package on the video game industry. The package contains four very similar cuts used to illustrate the increase in games that use new types of controllers such as the ones held by the couple pictured. The emphasis in all the shots seems to be the action of the subjects' hands; however, the camera operator has also been careful to include the subjects' faces, allowing us to see their expressions of concentration and enjoyment as they play the games.
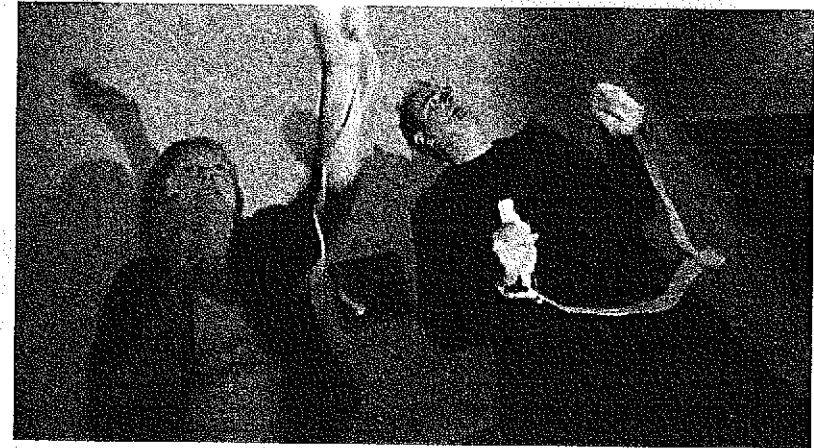
Figure 3.10   Low angle shot showing game-players' hands

The typical position of human hands is below the level of the face, so a shot that wants to focus on hands and also capture facial expression as economically as possible is best constructed from a low angle. It might be argued that this 'economical' portrayal is in fact a lazy shorthand for what should have been an edited sequence of three or four cuts; indeed, we might be wise to look 'behind' the image here to the background of decreasing resources (in this case the time, machinery and personnel involved in video-editing) against which the process of image creation took place.

In summary, the specific features of images may at times be under the influence of the physical features of whatever is being portrayed, and while image-makers are involved in deciding whether a particular object will be portrayed or not, their choice of *how* to portray the object may be externally constrained.

The nature of 'news': Access and overview

A definitional quality of the kind of 'general news' that the BBC and NHK present is that it is of general interest to a great number of people who on occasion are affected directly, becoming active participants. It is reasonable to expect that portrayals of news events may therefore sometimes necessitate portrayals of large numbers of people. I would argue that the primary motivation behind the use of high-angle shots, rather than to express any relationship of power or subjection, is simply that a higher vantage point gives a broader view of an area, thus enabling such
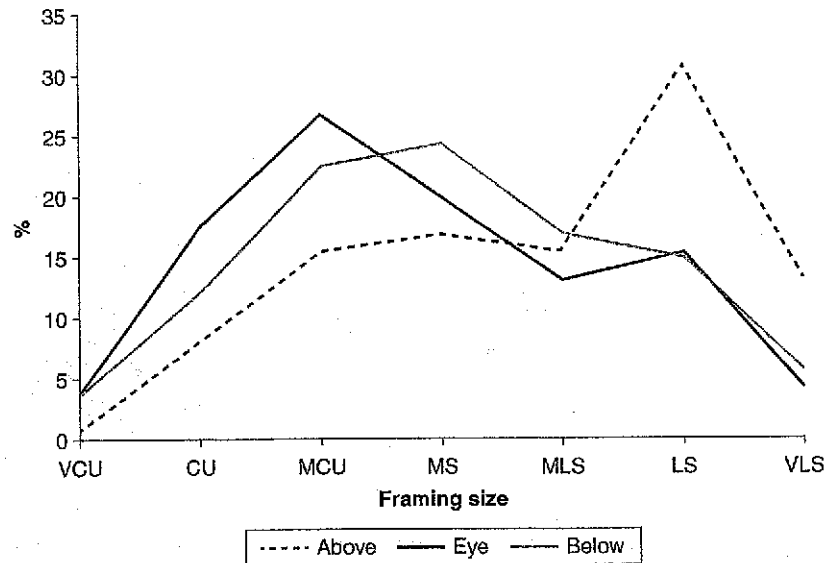
Figure 3.11 High-angle shots and framing sizes

Figure 3.12 NHK high angle: Crowd at Okinawa protest

Figure 3.13 BBC high angle: Conference crowd

portrayals. High shots provide either *access* to a scene otherwise difficult to 'picture', or a contextual *overview*.

This reading seems to be confirmed by the distribution of vertical angles across various framing sizes, illustrated in Figure 3.11: notice the large proportion (31 per cent) of long shots which are taken from above eye level.[8] This tendency is visible in both broadcasters, with the BBC data clearly illustrating the apparent link between increasing camera angle and increasing width of shot.

As can be seen in the images shown in Figure 3.12 to Figure 3.15, an obvious theme of these images is 'crowds' and 'groups'; from the aerial shot of a large crowd of attendees at a protest meeting in Okinawa (Figure 3.12) to a much smaller group gathered outside a UK courtroom to make a press statement (Figure 3.15). I would argue that the portrayal chosen by the image-maker in the majority of scenes of this nature has very little to do with the desire to show the portrayed actors as being somehow powerless or in a position of subordination and everything to do with getting a good 'overview' of a scene which plays out on the flat, providing an adequate and economical visual description of the physical space within which the portrayed events or actions are taking place.
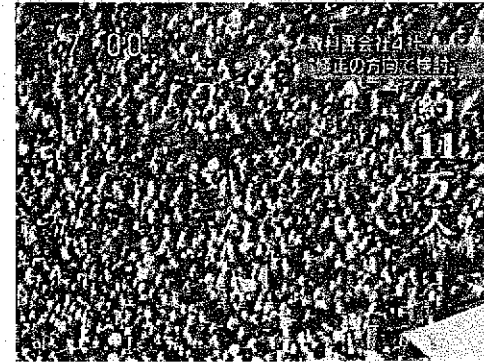
Looking at the shots in the 'high' and 'very high' categories, whether they tend to be wider or tighter, we can see a fairly clear tendency. Of the 114 shots coded as 'high' or 'very high', 33 are in the three categories at the tighter end of the framing scale,[9] while 81 are in the three categories at the wider end of the scale. As shots get 'higher', they also get 'wider'. Counts for these shots are perhaps rather too low to allow categorical statements on the matter. However, the data do offer some support for the following argument: the very high-angle shot, which is more often than not (19 of 32 shots) a long or very long shot, is used primarily as a

Figure 3.14   NHK high angle: Earthquake rescue

Figure 3.15   BBC high angle: Group outside court

way of conveniently capturing and depicting the scale of events occurring on a fairly wide stage rather than as a semiotic resource expressing, or putting forward, the image-maker's view of the power relationship which should obtain between the portrayed and the image-maker or audience.

This can perhaps be seen as an attempt on the part of the image-maker to avoid dissonance between image and narration; conversely television reporters are routinely encouraged to 'write to picture' (BBC Academy

2014). Any dissonance between words and images can have a negative effect on audience understanding (Grimes 1991). For example, let us imagine a news report of a political rally which, accurately or not, the commentary tells us 10,000 people attended. If the image-maker proposes a selection of images from the rally, shot from in front of the crowd and thus showing just the front 'layer' of participants, this might lead us, as viewers, to question the accuracy of the reported figures. If 10,000 people did actually attend why not show them? Why show just 150? The most persuasive – and least dissonant – shot the image-maker could bring back would be the one that showed, in an instant, every one of the 10,000 reported attendees. Such an image cannot be taken from eye level unless the event takes place in an amphitheatre or other space specifically designed to create an eyeline between a given point and a large number of viewers/objects. The simplest strategy in the absence of the above is for the image-maker to seek some raised vantage point from which such a view, or one that at least approaches it, can be obtained. Some distinction must therefore be made between high-angle wide shots, which can be considered semiotically innocuous in the sense that they are, I would argue, not the result of an intention to depict power relations but to depict scale, and high-angle shots at tighter framing sizes, which may well have a different intent. There are very few of this latter type of image in the corpus; one such, coded as 'very high-angle' and 'medium close-up', was created for use in an anonymous interview and showed a view from over the subject's shoulder of their hands in their lap. The intention here was to hide the speaker's identity whilst providing enough visuals to carry the recorded interview; the camera operator's solution in this instance was to produce a sequence of increasingly idiosyncratic images, the variations of which replaced the variations in facial expression viewers expect in an interview.

The nature of the news image is, therefore, as well as being under the influence of both the physical environment and the physical features of the portrayed object, also affected by the nature of news communication itself.

Low angles: Authority figures?

This leaves us with a few images which should probably be dealt with separately. There are a number of images, especially from the BBC sample, where the conventional reading makes sense, or at least there seems to be a convergence of pictorial form and content.

Figure 3.16   Police officer pictured from low angle

Figure 3.16 seems to be an archetypical instance which illustrates the conventional reading: pictured is a uniformed police officer patrolling the high street of a town somewhere in the UK. This is an image from a package covering UK crime figures, made up of 24 cuts, 12 of which portray police officers. Interestingly, there are two other cuts in this package (both of highly modulated generic library material, suggesting the potential for repeated use) that show police officers from below eye level. Of all the stories in the sample considered, this one is closest to using images in a way that approaches what conventional readings would lead us to expect. There seems to be no motivation for the low-angle depiction other than the camera operator's creative decision to do so. I would argue that it is only from the free exercise of this decision-making faculty – not motivated by the surrounding environment or material circumstances – that meaning emerges and that a primarily semiotic reading becomes useful.

By way of contrast we also have images – again seemingly created without any particular circumstantial motivation – such as Figure 3.17. This shows morning commuters crossing a London bridge and is used as part of a package covering the UK government's plans to cut welfare spending. Has the camera operator here deliberately created an image of 'empowered commuters', or have they just decided to make use of the resources available in the immediate environment (in this case by resting the camera on the ground) to create a composition suitably pleasing to the eye (and, perhaps more importantly, the video editor)?
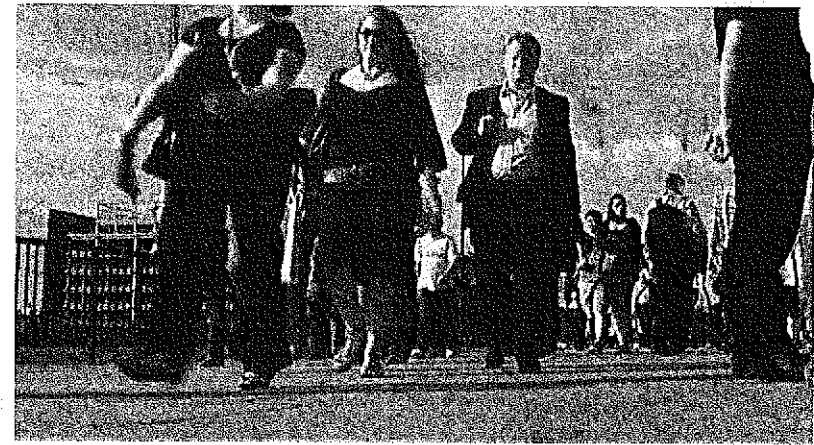
Figure 3.17   Commuters portrayed from low angle

Summary

In very few of the very high- or low-angle images found in the corpus does an interpretation based solely on the supposedly 'subordinating' or 'empowering' nature of these shots seem appropriate, given what we know of the circumstances of production. The images which make use of these 'semiotic resources' would be, in the majority of cases, difficult to account for in terms of any intention on the part of the image-maker to communicate the meaning which can be inferred.

For the purposes of this study the evidence we have to draw on is limited to the texts themselves; we do not have access to what *may* have been going through the mind of the image-maker or how a viewer *might* read the image. The only way forward has been to survey the images as used, identify consistencies and suggest explanations – drawn from the *material* rather than the *mental* circumstances of their creation – for the patterns of use identified. Variations in vertical camera angle can be seen to be more connected to the image-makers' desire to provide a succinct depiction of a given object or relationship of a certain size or scope, whether a politician on a 'meet and greet' or a crowd of demonstrators. If the flow of images of television news is to be viewed as a form of communication, then it must also be admitted that this stream of information is heavily motivated by ideational considerations and a need for parsimony of realisation. Any interpersonal meanings, any

assessments or evaluations of relationship between the portrayed and the viewer seem to be very secondary.

Conclusion

The meaningful categories suggested by theory as worthy of consideration actually encompass only a very small proportion of the images encountered. Of the 1,081 images in the sample, less than ten could realistically be interpreted as being expressions of the kinds of meanings posited. This raises a fundamental question about the fit between the research object and approaches suggested by theory. Is this ultimately an approach which views pictorial aspects of news images as largely devoid of meaning?

Of course there may also be a problem with the choice of research subject: At what level is the idea of a televisual discourse valid? If we begin to take apart television news at the level of the individual cut, it becomes difficult to see any consistent message; within the space of a single story, or even within a few seconds, it is possible to see what might be considered to be semiotically contradictory representations. The obvious next question, in that case, is what *is* the appropriate object of analysis? Perhaps, rather than the single, it is the sequence (a visual phrase?) or the individual story, maybe the programme as a whole, or perhaps the selection of stories that deal with a particular subject area, or indeed maybe the output of a single channel or broadcaster.

On the other hand (and putting to one side the problems identified above), we might perhaps be justified in reaching a generally positive assessment of the news image creator's ability to produce images which approach an objective description of the world; the proportion of images which might reasonably be seen as 'comment', that is, expressing some sort of evaluation of the relationship between portrayed social actors and viewers, is minimal. The majority of images are, in terms of the pictorial semiotic resources manifest as camera angles, hardly worthy of further comment.[10] We could also view as successful the process of 'semiotic inoculation' that is part of becoming a journalist, during which trainees are made aware of the expressive potential of certain types of images and are thus able to avoid creating them, or at least are sensitised to the circumstances in which the particular images or shots might or might not be acceptable within the framework of objectivity.

This purposeful avoidance of 'comment' might lead one to the conclusion that television news camera operators are not communicators at all, merely extracting sequences from the world and saying, for example,

'Look, a house! Look, a window!' and so on; however, this interpretation is difficult to tally with the everyday experience of watching television. Of course, communication may be unintentional, and miscommunication in mass communication is certainly to be expected (Hall 2000) if it is not perhaps the norm (Eco 1980: 105). We must never forget that most of the time images are created according primarily to something akin to the 'principle of least effort'. In light of this, if as individual viewers we may read texts as we see fit, as analysts we have a responsibility to not over-interpret the television news image – while working towards identifying a suitable analytical level which can be used to both appreciate and critique the undoubted communicative role of the news image.

Notes

1. I use this term in the generic way it is used in television production to refer to any means of instantaneously transferring visuals and audio from one location to another whether this be by means of microwaves, fibre-optic cables, satellite or, more common in recent years, satellite telephony.
2. At the same time images were also coded for a number of other features such as the presence and type of camera movement, framing size, presence and type of modulation. While these data are not used extensively in this study I refer to a relationship between 'long shots' and high camera angles in a later section of this study.
3. Total counts in these tables vary as it was not always possible to code all images for all features.
4. Of course, not knowing the details of the shoot we cannot *know* whether there was a *conscious decision* to prefer a ground-level view to an available alternative or whether this position was the only one accessible.
5. Referring to digital manipulation of colour, brightness, focus and so on, making images less 'realistic'.
6. Of the 26 BBC shots coded 'very high' angle, 14 were taken from the parliament cameras.
7. One of the camera operators interviewed in Tuchman (1973: 8) criticises what appears from the description to be a similar low-angle shot of US politician Adlai Stevenson, as the camera operator has emphasised the hand-shaking at the expense of a clear view of the individual's face.
8. Counts for 'high' and 'very high', and 'low' and 'very low' camera angles have been combined for clarity.
9. All the images referred to in this study were coded not just for camera-angle but for a number of other pictorial features, one of which was 'framing size'. The 'tighter' framing sizes are the VCU (very close-up), the CU (close-up) and MCU (medium close-up); the 'wider' shots were MLS (medium long shot), LS (long shot), VLS (very long shot). Definitions can be found in Koga-Browes (2013).

10. This statement makes the assumption, which we might want to question, that the standard (eye-level, full-face) portrayal of social actors is the 'best' way for television news to portray them.

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