

Audiovisual Technology in ODL Literary Studies: Educational Video and DVD

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In this paper, I will present some key issues involving the educational video, without overestimating but also without diminishing its effectiveness and the aims that it is called to serve each time, in the context of a particular educational process.

Let me begin with a question: *what is an educational video?*

The working definition often used both by people involved in audiovisual production and by academics and educational consultants is so broad as to include fictional films of the international movie industry, which potentially, if placed in the context of a particular educational process, may well produce a successful educational result.

Although I personally don't disagree with such an inclusive definition, for the needs of the present discussion I would limit the definition of educational video in two characteristics:

1. A video or other audiovisual material is characterised as educational, when it is produced for specific educational purposes and is addressed to a particular group of spectators (target group) sharing a common "cognitive level".

2. The main characteristic of the content of an educational video is the production of "cognitive result". That is to say, it must contain all the information, analysis and other elements necessary to lead the spectator-student to the cognitive result that the specific video aims at.

What we now need is to determine the significance of the spectator's-student's subjective cognitive constitution. Different theorists of learning (Chomsky, Watson and Skinner, Bandura, Piaget, Vygotsky, Goleman) lead us to the assumption that we learn (or acquire knowledge) in different ways and paces, depending on our personal characteristics and needs.¹

Consequently, each student exposed to an educational process is cognitively constituted. And despite the fact that all students may be exposed collectively to the same educational material, they are still constituted subjectively.

¹ Cf. Kokkos & Lionarakis 1998.

An important factor of this procedure of learning is the transmission of information. By this I mean that the ability to convey knowledge to a subject always depends, on one hand, on the speed of flow of cognitive information by the teacher and, on the other, on the speed of its absorption by the student. These two factors, which are measured in time units, should be synchronised. This is crucial for the production of educational audiovisual material, since it determines (among other things) the temporal duration of each one of its parts or modules.

A Video also has certain general characteristics, which determine its relation to the spectator, regardless of its content and specific purpose. This relation between the video and the spectator should always be kept in mind when a video is filmed, especially when its purpose is educational. But which are these general characteristics? The formulation of meanings in a video (in our case, meanings of an educational character, which lead to the pursued cognitive result) entails a combination of discourse, image and sound. Image and sound coexist in a video, and constitute the vehicle for the formulation of meanings that we wish the spectator to decode. In my view, there are two main characteristics that determine meaning in an audiovisual discourse: Narrative structure and representation of reality.

By its narrative structure, an audiovisual discourse is characterised as fictional or non-fictional. Fictional audiovisual discourse narrates a story, either one based on elements from real life or an entirely fictional one, with a beginning, an end and a certain time unity. The narrator brings the element of unity to the narration.² Let us accept, for the purposes of this discussion, that the narrator in an educational video is the teacher who, along with the director, go through the copious process of production (script, shooting, editing), to formulate the meanings that they wish the recipient of the narration (the spectator-student) to decode. Let's see a clip:

<“Iakovos Kambanellis in his Miracle Yard”, Educational Documentary, directed by Michalis Likoudis, 2002 [In Greek]>

The clip that we have just watched comes from an educational documentary about the famous Greek playwright Iakovos Kampanellis – and the educational documentary

² Cf. Doxiadis 1989: 35.

has been defined as non-fictional film.³ Nevertheless, the documentary of which we watched an excerpt seems to correspond to the characteristics of fictional discourse, as we saw them a little earlier. It is a documentary that unfolds a story, a true biography with a beginning, an end and narrative time unity. The narrator is the playwright himself, who relates that story according to questions that have been formulated by the educational consultant of the documentary and, also, according to the narrative order organised by the director during the editing procedure.

The excerpt we just watched demonstrated the formulation, by the playwright himself, of certain key meanings (Collective Destiny, as Kampanellis called it), which, according to the educational consultant, permeate his entire work. At the same time, and with all due respect to the playwright's personality and individual biographical characteristics, I would say that the actual narrator here is the educational consultant and the director, since different questions and/or a different editing of the answers would have given a very different result.

It is important, then, to clarify that a documentary is not necessarily non-fictional audiovisual discourse. It may actually be a fictional documentary. However if the documentary we have just watched isn't a recording of non-fictional audiovisual discourse, then what is?

A crucial point for the determination of non-fictional audiovisual discourse is that this discourse is recorded/shot directly at the point and time where it takes place, without any intervention by the production specialists (director and educational consultant). Nevertheless, objective recording/shooting – and this is something I would particularly want to stress to the educators among us – in the sense of absolute identification of the fact with its portrayal in the recording, is not really an option. Although production specialists may not intervene directly in the development of action, they will always intervene in some way, e.g. by using subjective visual angles for the shooting of action. An example may help us clarify this fine distinction.

Many directors and scholars in the history of theatre and literature have debated on the way in which a theatrical performance should be video-recorded, in order for this video to be used as educational material. Clearly, in this case the director is called to record a theatrical performance that exists and develops without his intervention. Which type of recording/shooting should he choose? Should he cut

³ According to Michael Rabiger (1992:5), a documentary records "the events and authentic reactions as these occur."

up the performance in many shots, changing the shooting visual angles? Or should he opt for the single and unique visual angle of a spectator of the theatrical performance? Should he perhaps attempt to move somewhere in between these options? I believe that even the prevailing opinion in educational circles today, which supports the filming of a theatrical performance with the technique of one shot and from a visual angle representing the objective glance of a spectator seated in the middle of the theatre (as proposed by John Kassavetes in the film "Opening Night"), cannot be characterized as objective. It remains a subjective view along with the others, which have their own arguments.

The second characteristic of audiovisual discourse is representation of reality. Audiovisual discourse is of course representative discourse. It is constituted by representations of images and sounds, which are related to the person's-spectator's experiences in his daily life. It is, I believe, particularly important to focus on the process by which this representative discourse is comprehended by the spectator-student. When the spectator-student is exposed to the audiovisual discourse, he is called to recognize and to decode the images he sees and the sounds he listens to. In order to do this, the spectator, while viewing, reflects on his own personal experience. He attempts to identify the images he sees and the sounds he listens to, with similar images and sounds from his own experience. After this primary recognition, the spectator moves on to the semantic reading of what he watches and listens to. Via this semantic recognition, meaning is given to the content of the audiovisual discourse, to which he has been exposed. We, therefore, observe that the experience that links uniquely and exclusively the person with reality, is necessary for the recognition of those idols of reality that occur from its exact recording (non-fictional films) or from its representation within the narration (in narrative or fictional films). Consequently, the educator who participates in the production of a video with specific educational objectives should be careful in handling the representations of reality included in his material. We will now see an example of a very important dilemma faced by the creative team of an educational video, which focuses on the biography of a poet while also presenting characteristic specimens from his work. In this case, the creation team faces the following dilemmas:

How should the poems be illustrated with images? Should we choose the traditional way of the poet reading on camera (if still in life) or should we use an actor? Shall we attempt to insert images while the poem is recited, which however

will certainly reflect on the viewer's interpretation of the poem? The answer once again depends on the educational objective we pursue. Let us now watch two clips that manifest this dilemma:

<“ Logbooks - George Seferis”, Documentary, directed by Stelios Charalambopoulos, Periplous, 2001 [In Greek]>

<“The Poet Thanassis Kostavaras”, Documentary, directed by Michalis Lykoudis, ERT, 1990 [In Greek]>

Considering the previous remarks, we could say that the ideal planning of an educational video with literary content and addressed to students of a humanities program might include:

Biographical data of the literary figure. These elements may be presented by the literary figure himself (in the manner of autobiography – as in the first video we watched earlier) or by a scholar. Biographical references should be supported by photographic or other visual material. For example, in the biographical account of the playwright Kampanellis we found and filmed the house where he was born and the place where he wrote his first play. Inclusion of such data in the educational video provides the student with a way to connect the literary figure's way of life with particular social references that he discerns in his work.

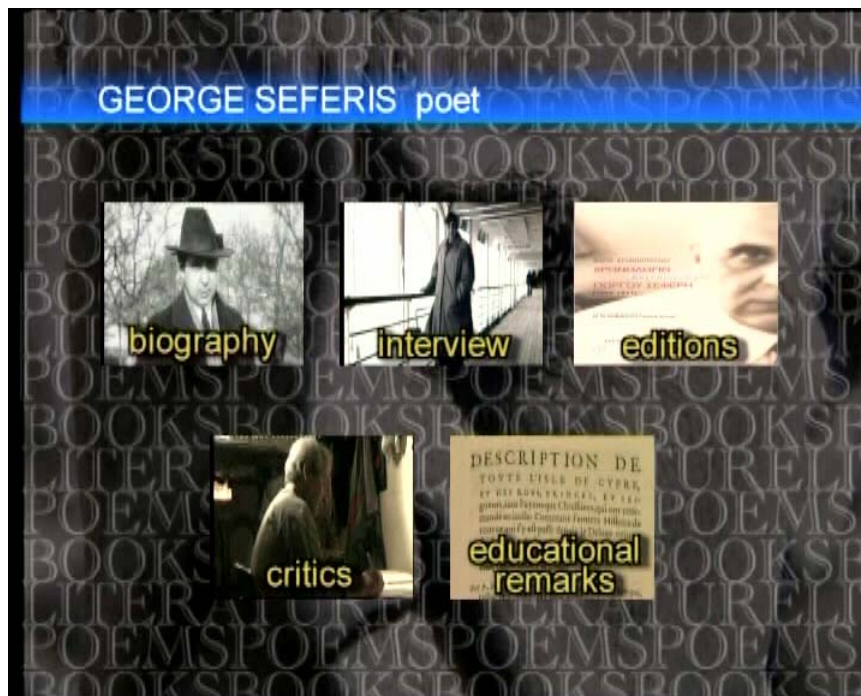
An interview with the literary figure himself (provided he is alive, of course, or that such an interview exists in an audiovisual file). The inclusion of a personal interview of the literary figure within an educational video is in my opinion particularly important, as it gives us the opportunity to record the personal struggle of the author with his work. An awareness of this fight will help the student decisively to confront the work from a balanced and critical perspective.

Images of the author's books, especially first editions.

Analysis of the author's literary work, with the method of specifically organised interviews. This is in my opinion the most difficult and risky part in the overall production of an educational VIDEO/DVD, as the educator must carefully select the list of people to be interviewed. Even though much has been written about the criteria of selection, my experience impels me to trust the one and unique criterion that has over the centuries supported the educational procedure. The criterion of the teacher who is keen to transmit knowledge and support the learning procedure. This

list must contain academics, literary critics and others if this is necessary, so as to represent the entire spectrum of views on the writer's work.

Biographical references in combination with interactive activities for the students-users. If the educational format is a DVD, then we are given the opportunity to include, in text form, bibliographical references, questions and answers and any other notes or clarifications that are pertinent to the work at hand. You can see how our menu will finally be shaped in an educational DVD sample:



To close this presentation, I would like to refer to two, not infrequent, cases of use of audiovisual material in education, which, however, in my opinion, do not lead to adequate results in a distance-learning program.

The first case refers to the presentation of literary works to the students, through feature- or TV-films. Here the student, who is already used to a particular way of viewing such audiovisual material, will stick almost exclusively to the evolution of filmic action and will most probably pass over the literary characteristics of the work on which the film is based. Even if the student does attempt to approach these, that approach is bound to be segmental. The only option the tutor has in order to transform a simple viewing into an educational procedure is either through his physical presence while the particular material is being used, or by the use of

supplementary exercises, questions, clarifications and activities for the user, i.e. the production of an educational DVD which contains both the movie and the material specifically written for educational use.

Another possibility, very popular not only in distance learning but also in conventional University programs, especially in the USA, is the one in which the instructor shoots by himself a series of lectures and distributes this audiovisual material to his students, who are called, by substituting their physical presence in the lectures, to transform the educational information they receive into knowledge. As I have already mentioned, this transformation depends on the ability of the instructor to effectively transmit information and also on the extent to which the video addresses the student's experience. As far as the effective transmission of information is concerned, we should keep in mind that, in the context of face-to-face tuition, the lecturer determines the flow of the cognitive information he provides, according to the reactions that he momentarily receives from his audience. In this sense, lecturing to a hypothetical audience precludes and even distorts communication between the tutor and the students. But isn't this the case with all educational videos/DVDs, since the audience is always absent from their shooting? Indeed, this holds true for the cases when the videos/DVDs are not addressed specifically to the experience of the student.

This paper was an effort to review the potential of audiovisual discourse as a channel of communication called to undertake specific educational roles. We need much more research on this issue. The effective transmission of information, the communicative environment where the audiovisual discourse is developed, its aesthetic constitution but, also, its material resistance in time, are some of the key questions we must put forward and debate, before we can establish an informed view of the video's position within the educational process.

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Films

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