

***What is in a 'Talking Head'?***  
***a visual ethnography on performativity, reflexivity and social interactionism***

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# Research process

## 2006-2009 / visual research experiments

➤ Children were invited to re-tell the story of Cinderella. (2006)

➤ Children were invited to tell a story of their choice. (2006)

3-person crew: sound, camera, field-research leader/interviewer (L. Lai)

➤ Educated adult women were invited to re-invent the story of Cinderella with their own stories (2007) (single researcher - Lai)

➤ A young researcher was asked to invite people in his circle of acquaintances to tell a story in front of the camera. (2008) (single researcher – Leung)

➤ Young researchers asked their friends and families to tell a story in front of the camera. (2007) (2009) (single researcher – individual students in my course “Visual Ethnography”)

# Research process

## 2006-2009

### COLLECTING STORIES

| everyday creativity | participation in folk/global culture | bed-time storytelling culture  
| speech creativity | appropriation, adaption, contexualization | use of stories |

- >From July to September, 2006, I met with 12 children between four and twelve years old in 8 field visits, in which they were asked to re-tell the story of Cinderella on the spot.
- >In December 2006, I read 20 different versions of the Cinderella story on Wikipedia, the oldest one dated back to 850 A.D. in China's Tang Dynasty.
- >In December 2007, I invited 2 female friends in my circle of acquaintances plus myself to improvise their versions of Cinderella based on 3 objects they blind-drew from the list of 281.
  - >In fall 2007 and spring 2009, I turned the talking head research into a research assignment in my class "visual ethnography." A total of 40+ talking heads were collected.
- >In summer 2008, I employed an undergraduate anthropology student who returned to HK for summer vacation to invite acquaintances to tell a self-elected story in front of the camera for about 5 minutes. A total of 13 subjects accepted the invitation and completed the exercise.

60-minute video work / video installation

# The talking heads

Synonyms of the talking head:

the head, the face, the close-up shot, time-image

**Description → Narrative → Epistemology**

Shot with a narrative function

Personalization, or individuation; it reveals character – compatible to portrait painting?

\* \* \* \*

Framing of significant details

\* \* \* \*

The human face is the unity of a privileged subject (someone with an identity, a status)

An affective image

\* \* \* \*

The beginning of abstraction...from object to image to object)

\* \* \* \*

The signature of experience, the empirical subject, the epistemological source

The eye-witness of general, shared experience

Source of authentication

**What is in a talking head?  
narrated selves and event structures, a phenomenological  
view on glocal connectivities**

Dr. Linda C.H. LAI  
The City University of Hong Kong

# Outline

- Motive/concern/background: why talking heads

- Paradigms:

## I. Phenomenological historiography – meanings & event-structure

Description as interpretation

Phenomenological concerns turned process- and surface-oriented research framework

## II. Ethnography – self & everyday language

(Garfinkel/Goffman/Sacks/Schutz/Lepper)

## III. Visual ethnography: the talking head as a dramatic stage and space of performance

- Frames/Frameworks: multiple-realities, my onion-model

- Analytical template

- Case Studies

- What's in the talking heads?

# The talking heads

## When:

For this presentation, mainly focuses on THs collected in 2007-2009

## Who:

Adults / deliberately exploring variety and diversity of subjects brought in front of the camera through **circles of acquaintances** (family members, former classmates, friends' friends, parents' colleagues etc.) / the youngest – 19; the oldest – in their 70s (for this presentation, senior citizens are skipped)

## How:

Researcher **explained** to each subject the purpose of the research [a project to collect stories told and heard by local people in Hong Kong] to get their consent

They all understood the task clearly and were invited to **volunteer** their own stories from sources of their own choice.

They understood the basic set up of having to talk for at least 5 minutes in front of a video camera. They were **conscious of the camera and the close-up effect**.

The emphasis of '**performance**' in front of the camera was implicitly suggested.

# The talking heads

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# What is it that I care about?

As a historian...

Mentalities...how do people really think? What do they care about?

What do they do with their thinking?

What are the way they do things?

How do they participate in a culture and a shared past of their culture?

What kind of ideal personhood do they project?

How do they make sense of the world? What kinds of self-made philosophy of life?

How does story-telling become the converging point of the above?

How does visuality generates specific forms of knowledge?

Everyday terrain

Everyday person – who are meaning-making, and via doing .....

# phenomenological basis of ethno-methodologies

Need for a philosophical framework for the analysis of the 'process' of everyday life

Event - Lived experience

## Meaning event

“To describe the full structure of an event of meaning – all that a meaning is, the complete phenomenon – involves displaying the manner in which the meaning takes place, the **qualitative “how” of its occurrence.**” (Andrew Reid Fuller: 29)

## Event structure

...a notion in phenomenological history, focuses particularly on the study and effects of 'inner temporality' articulated in the talking-head subjects' judgment and action in their respective everyday contexts

- Meanings take the form of event structure.
- Meaning's event structure are enfolded in the particularity of ordinary things.

## Description is interpretation

- Phenomenological description is at the same time phenomenological interpreting.
- Meaning presumes the observer: meaning is for those who are observing...

phenomenological basis: **description is interpretation**

Invariant structure of a perceptual event

**Multiple realities** (Garfunkel)

**Frame analysis** (Goffman)

Productive surfaces of the observable (meanings not beyond, beneath... but within...)

– the field, the situation, the event

**Ethnography**

**Visual ethnography**

## Brief summary of the phenomenological basis of this project\* \*

The analysis of the talking heads in this paper examines what constitutes an 'event' to each subject in an episode of perception and verbal judgment. (Mark Blum)

The implied 'logic of events' leads us to analyze the language configuration in each talking-head document: **event structure is most detectable in the thought path of a person.**

Analysis on **language (speech) level** as well as **narrative (discursive, logical) level** should work together.

# Description is interpretation

## Horizontal mapping

Multiple realities to establish diversity, variety, anomalies and repetitions

Different subjects at different time and space linked together via circles of acquaintances

Calling attention to function phenomenon of speech as mental structure and narrative trajectory as event structure for comparison across all subjects. (Carlo Ginzburg, Clifford Geertz, E.P. Thompson)

## “Onion” approach

Repeated analysis, multiple methodologies

Beginning with speech and camera presence

Frame analysis

Talk analysis

Membership categorization approach

Speech acts

Onion approach:  
multiple frames – multiple realities – multiple analysis

Harvey Sacks' paradigm as my frame of reference:

[Harold Garfinkel, Erving Goffman] everyday interaction

[Wittgenstein, Naom Chomsky] everyday language

- Categorization analysis + sequential analysis
- The relationship between talk, context and culture
- Story-telling – narrative analysis

*“Sacks was interested in story-telling as an example of social-order-in-practice, and viewed the analyzability of stories as an important source of data in the empirical study of situated action.” (Lepper: 44)*

The performance space of the close-up head-shot talking head...

Onion approach:  
multiple frames – multiple realities – multiple analysis

an “**inductive analytic method**” (Lepper: 3, 8) – i.e. return to the same data over and over again..

To go beyond the pure use of operational definitions, e.g. class, social roles... (Lepper: 3, on Sacks)

To go beyond the search for final causes of a phenomenon...instead, apply multiple questions: (Lepper: 3, on Sacks)

> “What kind of social object is this utterance/communication?”

> What interactional work does it do in the context in which it was employed?

> How does it achieve the task it seeks to do?

(Harvey Sacks’ key questions)

# multiple frames – multiple realities – multiple analysis

my “inductive analytic method” – multiple return to the same data over and over again..

**Each talking head is an event of multiple worlds.**

- What speech categories: creativity
- Things done words
- Personhood - Footing – the projected self
- Personhood – narrated selves, structured selves, eventful selves (identity play and performance)
- What have they brought to the ‘stage’-space of the framed talking head?
- Strategies of citizenship/subject-enactment: from the very local to the global
- What stories: the world represented, the world as narrative objects

# frame analysis

Key question:

## What is it that's going on?

- the study and characterization of a situation
- How an individual participates in a definition of the situation...

## Primary frame

In this project, subjects are invited to come in front of the camera to tell a story, or things they regard as a story worth telling.

Strip of activities – capacity of participants to ‘disattend’

Anchoring activities: involvement

Breaking frame

## The primary frame(work)

What is happening in the real social world..

Story-collecting | Story-telling

What is worth-telling ← → What is there to tell?

### Repeated research activities strategied over time:

- Children were invited to re-tell the story of Cinderella. (2006)
- Children were invited to tell a story of their choice. (2006)
- Educated adult women were invited to re-invent the story of Cinderella with their own stories (2007)
- A young researcher was asked to invite people in his circle of acquaintances to tell a story in front of the camera. (2008)
- Young researchers asked their friends and families to tell a story in front of the camera. (2007) (2009)

## The Talking Head as the primary frame(work)\*\*\*

The Talking Head (TH) is a strip of activities (definitions of a situation, involvement, participation, withdrawal, disruption...)

The TH is a dramatic stage in front of the camera where the subjects delivered a focused performance of speech and narrative...

The TH is a conceptual space in the material form of a close-up frontal head-shot whereby the researcher studies **event structures...**

# My talking head paradigm

It is many things in a single event due to its performance nature.

- Action
- Verbal articulation
- Consciousness
- Self-purpose
- Interactionism...

...can be viewed in one single instance of speech

The multiple layer-frame analysis encompasses the following:

- Event structure (sense-making, life philosophy)
- Narrative trajectory
- Game (Anssi Perakyla: the Milan School's Family Systems Theory)
- "I"
- Language mobilization (speech mode invention)
- Completion of model events
- Speech act (doing things with words)

# Ideal template for full analysis

## (1) discourse/narrative analysis:

- 1-a: trajectory: from personal to global, steps (how many, which steps)
- 1-b: narrative reasoning: in-built logic

## (2) Stage/Drama

- 2-a: what do they bring to the stage: preparation, information contemplated
- 2-b: self-management, self presentation
- 2-c: dramatic role [see 4-b]
- 2-d: stage and props (self selected? Where the individual was found)

## (3) Speech-level

- 3-a: the location of I
- 3-b: speech type by rhetoric (use analogies)

## Ideal template for full analysis

### (4) Speech-event

- 4-a: speech acts: deeds completed by speech
- 4-b: performance: role (use analogies) – social, (melo-) dramatic... [see 2-c]

### (5) Self-Event [\*\*\*This could be the summary of (1) to (4)]

- 5-a: types of event: what is being talked about, what content (fictional, reportive, confessional, remembrance, analysis), the story being told...significance
- 5-b: event structure: sense of time
- 5-c: event structure: location of self
- 5-d: sense-making of the 'world'
- 5-e: role-making

[refer to Excel file]

# Case study 1: making event

Within-frame

Out-of-frame activities

TH#2 – male – age 19

31.07.2008 / late afternoon

HKU Student Dormitory (Lee Hall) 5/F, Room of a classmate

## Case study 1: making event



## Case study 1: making event

[obvious step-in process – crossing the threshold to the realm of performance or role-playing]

- 11 minutes 40 seconds on tape of camera presence to come up with a story.
- Finally began by saying, “I’m not sure if I can last for 5 minutes.”
- Actual beginning of the story – 12:23
- Not really a story, but personality portrait of a hall-mate via 2 anecdotes and a short summary of the person which is more or less positive affirmation. Anecdotes highlight crazy, silly things he has done.
- Reason for telling this story: he wanted to tell something of which he’s an eye-witness – that he was there, he saw it, and he knew his feeling.

# Case study 1: making event

- What's most intriguing in this talking head document is the on-going conversation behind the camera, between the researcher and another talking-head subject who's just done with his story-telling.
- In this clip, we heard the main talking head subject articulating every now and then his struggling to piece together his story.
- In the casual conversation...
  - comments (in response to the main subject's struggle) on how they are poor in story ideas, how HK is lacking in a strong story-telling culture, how their ideas are mainly from TV, games, if not some remote stories like the Chinese moon fairy
  - TH subject 2 asked researcher what people study in anthropology: there is a clarification about anthropology as opposed to archaeology; researcher emphasizing the study of natives and their transaction activities; and TH-subject 2's offering his sense-making of anthropology's relevance to contemporary corporate culture – that people may find an anthropology student's skill in observation and analysis useful for contemporary tasks (the practical worth of an academic discipline)...
- Strange enough, it seems they were not aware of the fact that they are actually engaged in an anthropological research.

## Case study 2: playing with frames – whose story?

TH#9

Mrs Law (researcher's mother) / early 50s  
/ 07.10.2007 / home

## Case study 2: playing with frames – whose story?



## Case study 2: playing with frames – whose story?

Many beginnings... Continuous correction and clarification of the beginning and setting of the story to highlight the effort to recall a real life experience, i.e. its truthfulness – that it is not just a story, but an event of her past experience... **ownership of the story is highlighted**... After a series of corrections, she finally settled on last summer, on her way to do groceries from Shatin to Mongkok, on a certain escalator (going up) between the KCR and the MTR (Kowloon Tong???)...

The ‘beginning’ also suggests the subject’s effort to build in details from her real life experience...- the story was built into her daily routine.

## Case study 2: playing with frames – whose story?

### Multiple roles

- Narrating story line – details on different characters – “I” introducing perception and impression of the story-teller
- Multiple cast – different gender, young (offender), police

Social setting – everyday setting – MTR elevator, street, Mongkok(?), Police station

A case of **problem-solving – freedom in public space** – it seems two characters are fighting for different kinds of freedom in the public space that are conflicting...

Social issue: insult, air pollution, impropriety,

**Police/police station as the agent of fairness settlement** is questioned

“I” as the good citizen – the only eye-witness who volunteers herself to accompany the group to the police station (“I” emphasizes that ‘everyone was silent’.) There’s a short exposition using “I” to state how intolerable she is with people who lack a sense of righteousness.

## Case study 2: playing with frames – whose story?

Dramatization: use “piannng...” many times to highlight the offensive nature of the fart; use direct speech for policeman and the two characters in the scene when the policeman was sorting out the facts.

- “Piannng....” – a total of 8 times.

The process of her own volunteering to do testimony at the police station is also highlighted in speech drama by providing the positive and negative sides of the argument.

Social knowledge: (1) eye-witnesses are important in a case of conflict; (2) it is wrong to care about only one’s business;

Specific personalized moral reasoning: nothing wrong with farting, it is the “piannng” action and the words of contempt (“...”) that make this case problematic.

## Case study 2: playing with frames – whose story?

The story-telling suggests the limitation of law and the police institution... some fairness can only be assessed properly by other means, such as individual respect...

In this case, **verbal insult is more evil than physical assault**. The person who suffers from bad smell and hid the guy in response can be pardoned because there's a higher standard of personal respect that is not inscribe in the law – this is her self-proposed version and standard of good citizenship and good ideal personhood.

To her, the real moment is when the 2nd guy hit the 1st guy from behind – twice, emphasized

Ending of the story... sudden side-track to a gender issue... being sarcastic and yet playful with being called “auntie” by the cop and returning by calling the cop “my good nephew” ...

## Case study 2: playing with frames – whose story?

- At around the end of 10 minutes, she revealed it was a story she made up. It's been told a few times and it had entertained many.
- When asked with which character she would identify, she chose the person who hits the guy who farts, emphasizing once again the “不文” (indecent) as the real problem.
- Before the clip closes, she stood up and said she was then really going to do her grocery – a full circle but on a different plane of reality.
- Dirty joke becomes a technical object.

# Case study 3: “the invisible women” – gender concealment

TH#3

Female / age 27

07.08.2008 / mid-afternoon / her work place

## Case study 3: “the invisible women” – gender concealment



## Case study 3: “the invisible women” – gender concealment

### Content:

- ‘Story of a family’ – how that family came into place – the birth and growth of a family – 3 generations – agricultural to modern HK – a family with 5 daughters
- Origin/birth: 2 villages connected because a family in Village A had a son grown up to age for marriage and found the daughter of a family in Village B.
- 2 young persons got married and had 5 children (**it was only until later, with crisis moment 1, that they were all girls**) – emphasis: pastoral peace of an agricultural family, wife also helping in farm work... father working in the fields, and good children who were all helpful

## Case study 3: “the invisible women” – gender concealment

### Crisis moment I

- **WHEN** youngest daughter (**1st time female gender is highlighted**) was a teenage, studying in the 5th level of secondary school – Father died, whole family in a sense of loss, lacking in direction
- ← fortunately, everybody in family work together [exact wording?] to make things work – 1st to 3rd daughter worked on their career, 4th and 5th daughter continued with their education – eldest daughter succeeded in her business, and 2nd and 3rd daughter joined her company
- Mom (**1st time Mom is the main subject**) was contented... family got together every now and then... to play mahjong; daughters often quietly ease Mom’s way to win...

Crisis moment II – grandchildren ... to study in HK or overseas...

## Case study 3: “the invisible women” – gender concealment

### Observations:

- Women are implied to be the main support or sustaining force of the family. However, on the narrative level, they are, most of the time, assigned the object position (supportive role). Only in occasion circumstances would one of them be temporarily assigned the main role – e.g. teenage youngest daughter (F.5) became the main character because her young age marked father’s death as a severe blow to the family; or Mom was for the first time the main subject when the narrative focuses on how the 5 daughters helped to pull the family together, in which case Mom’s contentedness is the subject.
- As a whole, the ‘main character’ on the narrative level is the family, whereas the story-teller’s choice of events highlighted women as the quiet, uncompromised enabler of the family institution.
- Note also how both cases of the two family crises were centered round men – father’s death, grandson’s future...
- Note also women are not called “sisters” – not from the point of view of the 5 sisters, but called “daughters” throughout – i.e. from the point of view of the family. They belong to the family; they are properties of the family institution, whether men function or not, or in disregard of men’s absence or presence.

## Case study 4: the philosopher

TH#12

Mr. Lam (researcher's father) / in his 50s

Spring 2009 / home

- A rabbit...
- Comparison of the world of the rabbits and humans'...
- His own life philosophy...

## Case study 4: the philosopher



## summary observations

[Refer to Excel table]

- What speech categories: creativity
- Things done words
- Personhood - Footing – the projected self
- Personhood – narrated selves, structured selves, eventful selves (identity play and performance)
- What have they brought to the ‘stage’-space of the framed talking head?
- Strategies of citizenship/subject-enactment: from the very local to the global
- What stories: the world represented, the world as narrative objects

## Back to research methodology

The story-telling talking head is a **convergent event of interaction:**

The subjects voluntarily brought **something they have** to the camera space

The researcher prepares a **performance space**: subjects free to talk, free to perform, free to manage their camera presence

A collection point of data for **conversation and speech analysis**:

**Mentalities, enactment of selves, event structure, inner temporality**