

# Sight AND Sound

# THE MIRROR



## MACHINE

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Half-inch videotape rigs selling for about \$1500, first introduced to the U.S. market by Japanese manufacturers as expensive toys for the home movie buff, are having a profound effect on all types of non-theatrical film-making in New York. The other day two of us from New York University's Alternate Media Center making programmes for Cable Television met some (red) Indians in front of the Museum of Natural History, shot for an hour and looked at our 'answer print' on the subway going home. It was played back via the same 3 lb. camera and 18 lb. deck we used to record it. No lab work was needed; no synchronisation of picture and sound. We edited in the camera.

Had this been hot news we could have shown it on the air in minutes. We could have played it back on the spot, giving the Indians themselves the assurance that we were 'telling it like it is', a not inconsiderable advantage in these days of up-tight minorities. We could have erased it and recorded again, using the same \$16 roll of tape.

With a minimum of training the Indians could have made their own show, and a lot of people will be doing just that as cable TV with its multiple channel capability spreads across the country. Already there are cable systems operating in every major trading area, where some eight to ten

up to a dozen TV channels snatched from the air by a cable company's tall community antennae. In many places they also get more old time movies, an automatic clock and weather report scanner which also carries public notices, and anything else the operator can get for little or no money that might please his subscribers and fill the several extra channels most systems provide.

We've come a long way since *Housing Problems*, that admirable British documentary made in the 1930s, gave a few slum dwellers a chance to speak for themselves despite the domination of a monster 35mm camera, a professional crew and a director fresh from the other side of town. Those of us who have spent the years between trying to find a simpler, less threatening way to introduce viewers to the viewed, even viewers to themselves, find these new little mirror machines heady stuff. We are willing to put up with limitations in editing capability, can accept the small screen size until a projection system is developed, and grow impatient with television engineers who tell us our half-inch tapes can never be relied on to produce a signal of professional quality and stability on the home set.

We reply, 'Maybe not . . . not yet . . .' shrugging away what may be major prob-

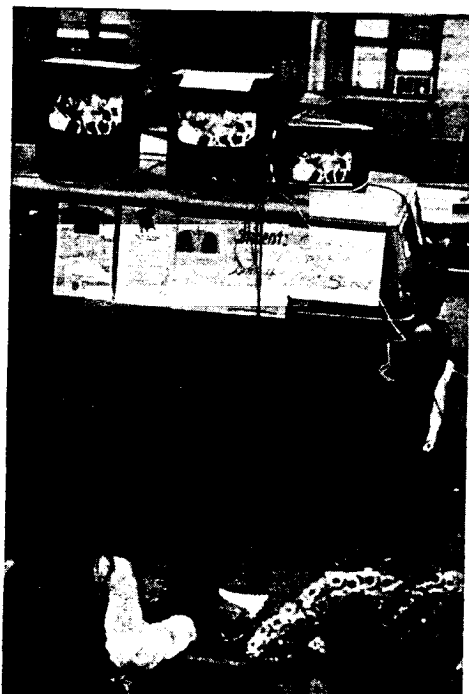
access to what's happening a few miles away that they now have to what's happening in London, New York, or on the moon.

I first met videotape, the two-inch variety now standard in TV studios, back in the late 1950s, when the New York Screen Directors' Guild persuaded its members to come to classes by telling us 'this machine will make film obsolete in ten years time'. Well, Guild members are still shooting a lot of film, most of it to be *transferred* to videotape before broadcast. Despite all the advantages inherent in tape, manufacturers of professional equipment have never built systems that are truly portable. Even the smaller equipment using one-inch tape looks like, and must be operated like, the heavy, pedestal-bound electronic cameras that determined TV studio production styles three decades ago. It is as if the 1972 automobiles were still being designed as horseless carriages.

Union regulations and operating procedures have remained equally rigid. So the hand-held 16mm camera became the instrument of choice for all of us who wanted to get a little closer to reality with our documentaries for the small screen. This meant we were carrying 28 pounds of camera on our shoulders. We were tied by wire to a sound man who had his own burden of equipment to lug about. Between the 'take' and our answer print we had the lab, the sound transfer studio, and all the chores of synching, editing, negative cutting and more lab work which we had come to accept as inescapable parts of film-making. For too many of us these chores became the most important part of the job. We let them, and the professional attitudes and practices inherited from 35mm studio feature production, distance us from the people we were making films about. By and large, the people in front of the 16mm camera held by a documentary film-maker today have little more chance to express themselves honestly and freely than they did in the 30s when *Housing Problems* seemed such a breakthrough.

I first met half-inch videotape at the National Film Board of Canada in 1968, when I left the U.S. for a two-year stint as guest Executive Producer for *Challenge for Change*, a programme designed to use film as a catalyst in various social programmes to improve the lot of Indians, poor fishermen, mothers on welfare. John Kemeny, the programme's founder, and Colin Low, a brilliant film-maker and social philosopher long at the Board, had already done enough by the time I was on the scene to prove that, with care and patience and the right choice of film-makers plus the expenditure of a great deal of money, film could and did have a considerable effect 'as an agent for social change'. What was needed, obviously, was a faster, cheaper means to do the job if the technique was to be applied on a broad scale. Most important, we had to find some way for the people to take more of a hand in the film-making themselves.

The two women who persuaded us to launch our first community videotape project were no ordinary film-makers. Dorothy Henaut and Bonnie Klein brought to the task a philosophy about democratic partici-



way editorial decisions are made. It is largely their concept, their way of working, which guides social animators, teachers and community leaders generally who are now applying *Challenge for Change* techniques across Canada.

The advantages of videotape for immediate playback to small groups were soon obvious to even the most resistant filmmaker at NFB; and most professional filmmakers are simply appalled at the whole idea of half-inch video. Nothing that easy to operate can possibly be of much worth. Distribution staff members were equally sceptical. 'Without a direct means of projection, what good is it for a larger audience?' they asked. It had taken them 30 years to make the 16mm. projector standard equipment in schools and village halls. Now we were asking them to begin an entirely new kind of distribution of an entirely new kind of reel that would require an entirely new kind of machine for playback. They were thinking in film terms, of course, not realising that the cheapness of tape made production for purely local use an affordable way to go. They were also denying the fact that the old way of distributing non-theatrical films for that larger audience had been made all but obsolete ten years before by the spread of TV.

Cable TV in Canada developed much more rapidly than in the U.S., largely because of geography and the distance between settlements. Many merchants put up community antennae because their customers couldn't get a decent signal unless this service was provided along with the set they bought. For a long time almost no one utilised the capacity these community antennae systems had for originating broadcasts themselves. But with some prodding by National Film Board representatives and local community leaders, a good many system owners were found willing to let their facilities be used by *Challenge for Change*. A series of community experiments was launched, using half-inch video as the basic tool, often augmented by 'live' programmes and film.

Today most of these community efforts are still modest ones, conducted by volunteers and backed by a National Film Board distribution field representative or a social animator paid by a university or government agency. The most successful have been in rural communities where difficulties of 'on air' reception often boost cable subscription to 80-90% of set owners, a not uncommon situation in many parts of North America. (Hilly West Virginia, the poorest state in the Union, is also the most heavily cabled, with over 60% of households subscribing.) Little money has come from the cable operators to support these efforts. They are so accustomed to filling their multiple channels with programmes pulled out of the air at no cost that they seem to regard free programming as a divine right.

A major effort to tap the cable operators' pockets for programme support was backed by the National Film Board in Thunder Bay, Ontario, two years ago when that community's cable licence was up for renewal by CRTC, Canada's regulatory body for broadcasting. 'Town Talk', a local organisation

of civic-minded people, wanted to take over the management of one cable channel, make programmes for it and be paid for their effort at the rate of one dollar a month per subscriber to be taken from the \$6 a month fee collected by the cable company.

The National Film Board spent a great deal of time and money to train the 'Town Talk' people as film and videotape makers. They learned to edit their tapes up to one inch for more film-like cutting and great stability of picture. In a surprisingly short time they were turning out programmes of professional quality without losing the local flavour. They won a large audience for their work throughout the viewing area. But they lost the battle. The cable company, strongly backed by their national association, fought the idea of giving up either control of programme content or the right to keep the money it collected. The CRTC, despite considerable public pressure from all over Canada to set a different precedent for community cable use, sided with the industry.

The FCC, the American equivalent of Canada's CRTC, has been equally dominated by the broadcasting industry. In fact Cable TV itself has suffered as more and more arbitrary curbs are put on its community-serving potential by this agency. Now there is a strong possibility that engineers at the FCC will decide to make it illegal to put half-inch videotape on Cable as it is now illegal to use half-inch on regular TV. The present half-inch system deliver only 310 lines of information and the American 'on air' legal minimum is 525 lines. But when the signal is carried by cable the quality is already guaranteed. Most home sets can't deliver more than the 310 lines the Japanese have chosen as their standard in any case.

It is the word 'Japanese' in that last sentence that is the tip-off. Practically all half-inch equipment available in the U.S. is of Japanese manufacture. Even Ampex, the U.S. manufacturer which dominates the professional studio equipment field, has opted to distribute Japanese-made half-inch equipment instead of making its own. Now, if the Japanese start nudging the American makers of studio equipment with their home-type gadgets there could be trouble ahead. Far easier to block this with a simple government regulation saying 'no half-inch on Cable because it's sub-standard' than to meet the competition of the market-place. And many a cable operator is ready to welcome such a decision as a way to avoid trouble without taking sides. As one of them remarked to me recently: 'What place has local politics got on an entertainment medium anyway? After all, we're guests in people's living rooms.'

This is not to say that every cable operator's office is being stormed by citizens hungry for access to the airways. Teleprompter, the nation's largest conglomerate with 212 franchises, is probably reflecting the dominant public mood in its current advertisements reading: *CABLE TV—The world's greatest football receiver.*

New York City is one of the few places in the U.S. where public access to Cable TV is a right, written into the 20-year agreements given to the two cable...

ber grows as rapidly as cable is laid, for TV reception in this city of skyscrapers is renownedly capricious. Our Alternate Media Center in the School of the Arts at New York University is one of several makers of programmes now being shown. Funded by the Markle Foundation to be a centre for experiments in community programming, we have stuck to half-inch tape for the most part, feeling its price, its portability and its ease of operation make whatever we do with it replicable in many places that couldn't afford to operate with professional equipment.

Because channel accessibility is relatively easy, we have experimented with programming events on cable in 'real time'. For example, we telecast 33 hours of a community school weekend when teachers, parents, architects and social scientists worked for three days and nights to develop plans and strategies for an experimental school. We put on 18 hours of material made at a conference at the NYU Law School on the rights of minors, at which we recorded a running commentary on, and reactions to, the adult-dominated panels as seen by the kids themselves.

Normal TV could have done these programmes with remote hook-ups, but at a cost only such mass-approved spectacles as football games can attract advertisers to support. A brief summary is all most news editors would give them, quite enough for most viewers. But for people who would like to be present, or whom the event's sponsors would like to attract, such potted versions are no substitute. For such events we use the half-inch tape, simply bicycling it to the cable's control room on a two-hour delay.

We are also developing weekly tapes with and about people in selected neighbourhoods where there is a concentration of cable subscribers. Poor people subscribe to cable quite as readily as do the affluent, it would seem. For the price of two tickets to the movies down town you can see a choice of eight or ten movies every day of the month on your cable hook-up, and you don't have to 'get a baby-sitter or risk your life on the streets to get there', as cable operators have not hesitated to emphasise, playing up the paranoia most New Yorkers suffer from these days.

Interestingly enough, it is just this problem—the mistrust of one New Yorker for another—that has been the dominant social concern of most of our tapes to date. Our approach, as developed by Red Burns and Jackie Park, two Canadian women long resident in the U.S. but still imbued with that country's extraordinary respect for community, has been to record people's lives and concerns with relatively little stress on 'issues'.

'Video portraits' might be a good term to use for tapes our young film-makers come back with at first. Slowly they get to know their chosen neighbourhood. The people in it watch 'Channel C' on the cable and come to trust the film-makers for not manipulating the news for entertainment value. They gain self-respect as they keep seeing themselves and each other on a medium usually reserved for the famous or infamous. In time they come to speak more honestly, less defensively, about what concerns them most.

of seeing on TV people whom you have lived near but not dared or bothered to know tends to reduce suspicion. An old Jewish gentleman who has been fearful of the Puerto Rican boys hanging out on the stoop can stop as he leaves the house and say, 'I saw you on TV last night'. Somehow these few words become a salutation and a compliment, taken as a friendly gesture by the receiver. A little thing, to be sure, but important in this city of invisible walls.

I have seen much the same technique at work in a remote mining town in Alberta and in the hills of Tennessee. New York is not the only place where such walls exist. This is a nation so dominated by commercial formula TV that 'live' entertainment, even good conversation, is often hard to find. A friend told me of a recent visit to his home town in the Middle West. Gone were the long summer evenings when grandparents, parents and children filled the front porches with songs, games and talk. Now, he said, the porches are deserted. The streets are quiet. Almost everyone is inside watching TV, each age group clustered around a different set, hypnotised by their own preferred brand of commercial entertainment. One more reason for all this effort we are making, then, is to see if TV can be turned into a stimulus for action as well as repose. Our goal is to get people involved, to get them to turn off their sets and join the living.

It should be stated in conclusion that the half-inch videotape scene in the U.S.,

particularly in New York City, is not confined to such application as I have described. Woodie and Stana Vasulka are among the many video artists whose Abstract, or Surrealist, or Dadaesque, or Videokinetic tapes are getting generous reviews in the press and shown in established museums like the Whitney and the Gallery of Modern Art. Encounter groups are into video in a big way, as are practitioners of many brands of psychotherapy. Even the pornographic market has discovered the gadget, and its facility for instant playback has stretched the possibilities for self-worship far beyond the innocent distractions known to Narcissus.

As a film teacher, I find video's advantages both obvious and almost terrifying. When everyone on the set can, in effect, look through the viewfinder via his own monitor as the shooting goes on, selection becomes almost too public an act. Maybe I was born in the wrong era, when film-making was a very personal and ego-gratifying art. Now it can also become a genuine communal effort. Asking if better films will result from all this is a bit like asking in 1860 if photography would ruin or improve the art of portrait painting. (And if that is an accurate analogy then surely film is in deep trouble.) Nonetheless, tape is here, portable at last and flexible. It can give immediate reassurance, immediate gratification. It is great fun to play with and not too awfully expensive to use. Only the very rich can say that about film. ■

*Videotape camera at a rock concert in Charleston; and (below right) a 'Challenge for Change' programme in which a pub owner in Alberta films his customers.*

