

Tomorrow's technology

"Only video can save the rock recording industry," announced The Journal as it led into its documentary on the subject. "Pay-TV is the last hope for Canadian program production," said just about everyone at the CRTC hearings last year. The entire communications industry is in the throes of momentous change as it adapts to the possibilities of new technology.

Once, television sales of films were called "ancillary" sales; something one worried about after the big theatrical deal was closed. Today, sales to network, cable and pay-TV – not to mention the video-cassette market – are making rich men out of producers who would never recoup from theatrical exhibition alone.

Even the producers of costly features are turning out mini-series as insurance against the changing viewing habits of North Americans. *For Those I Loved*, *Les Plouffe* and its sequel, *Louisiana* and *Le Matou* – if you miss them at the neighborhood theatre, you can catch the series on TV. Distribution arrangements with HBO and foreign television channels are hailed today as the deals with the Majors were hailed yesterday.

For the makers of non-feature films, television is a primary market, and the dearth of outlets in Canada is of major concern.

Yet the hi-tech revolution means more to filmmakers than simply a diversification of distribution outlets. It should mean an in-house revolution in the way films are shot. The introduction of video in pre-production and production is well underway among those who work with commercials and television production. To date, Canadians have not made much use of the innovations when making theatrical features, though experiments are advanced in the States.

These issues are the subject of several articles in this issue. Carol Rutter remarks on Francis Coppola's use of hi-tech innovations in production and looks ahead to the day when film and video will be interchangeable. Joyce Nelson looks at television broadcasting of the news, and studies the context and content, and the illusions which video makes possible. Mary Jane Miller comments on the changes in viewing habits which video-cassette makes possible, and suggests that film/television aesthetics will undergo a revolution as well. Toronto's Trade Forum dealt with the practical questions before the Canadian film community.

Meanwhile, this community awaits the results of federal inquiries into film policy. It is relieved to see that the Cabinet has judged wise to reverse the CRTC's "correction of error" which seemed to let the Canadian pay operators off the hook in terms of Canadian production. But there is skepticism that the government will be innovative enough to adapt its policies to this world-wide electronic revolution.

As we wait, the federal government is losing authority over those who make theatrical features. The capital cost allowance regulations have become narrow to the point that few producers are using the tax shelter to finance their films. Their productions, made with Canadian directors and crew, will qualify as "Canadian content" according to the CRTC definition of a Canadian program, and this meets their needs. Until the CRTC and the Department of Communications can agree upon the definition of a Canadian film, the problem will persist.

With such elementary problems to solve, the monumental challenge of coping with the electronic revolution looms large and, perhaps, insurmountable.

The editors

OPINION

TV – no longer the ephemeral art

Sixty-eight percent of our television diet is drama. The VCR is going to change the viewers, the critics, and the makers of sitcoms, serials, series and specials. Owners of VCRs are already becoming collectors. In due course some will turn into connoisseurs. Drama cassettes now form the basis of university curricula and are subject to the same scholarly analysis as films. One day some of the really superb kines of the '50s and '60s (they do exist – I've seen 300 of them) as well as more recent tapes could come to life again. Programs will return, to haunt critics who damned them 20 years ago, safe (they thought) in the knowledge that they had disappeared, and to provide a sense of continuity for writers, producers, directors, actors, whose work will be seen in a context.

The two basic changes which a VCR makes for its owner are that each person can build an individual library of programs and that viewers can watch what

ever program he/she chooses at any convenient hour. With reruns now commonplace, a viewer can collect a whole series from pilot to finale, or nearly a whole season of half-hour sitcoms on one tape. For the first time it is possible to collect a season, compare one episode to another, or trace the development of a favourite program. Elusive bits of plot or characterization in intricate series like *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* can be unravelled. Nuances, visual images, dramatic irony, the details of ambience, the quick aside or the buried allusion can be enjoyed on subsequent viewings. Slow motion, stop-frame and search features will change the nature of viewing itself.

Programmers will have to think again. Now VCR owners can watch two conflicting favourites, or tape newcomers sent on suicide missions against established winners, for viewing at a more convenient time. New series may not

disappear quite so quickly, if people can look in on them at their leisure and then slot their tapes against a more established but less interesting offering. This could well extend the range of programs available. If pay-TV, striving to be different in order to attract a share of the audience, tapes for broadcast and cassette resale plays for Stratford, Vancouver's New Play Centre, CODCO, i.e. the atypical, the offbeat, the regional drama may find new audiences. Affiliates who shunt cultural programs into unprofitable time slots like 11:45 Sunday nights are out of luck. VCR owners simply reschedule them.

CBC anthology drama buffs, a not-quite-yet endangered species, can feast on the considerable achievements of the CBC in the '50s and '60s by taping choice selections from the continuing retrospective series "Rear View Mirror." Cassettes give both the connoisseurs and the critics a chance to test nostalgic memories against the actual broadcast.

The educational and creative opportunities offered by VCRs are also fascinating. Some VCR owners will either join the small cadre of video artists who choose video tape as their medium of expression or extend the audience of such artists. Video cabaret will become more commonplace.

Students and teachers can compose visual essays with segments from programs broadcast over a six-month period. Last season, church study groups, distress centre training leaders or anyone else could have made a visual essay on "Televangelism" or "Television Satire 1955 to 1982" or "Suicide and its Causes." Does the newly drafted copyright law account for this possibility?

At the same time, live programs – news, sports, specials – will acquire a new flavour because they cannot be controlled by a console. Live drama may well return because of its crackle of now-or-never energy. Its flow and concentration may appeal to viewers sated on tapes they can slow, repeat, elide or wipe and reuse at will. The CBC's first "live" drama in 20 years was a great success in the fall of 1981.

But the days of mass schlock as broadcast on the privately owned networks may be numbered. Instead, a disc of *Three's Company* could be available next to the Harlequin romances and we would pay for an episode as we would

pay for the rest of our junk food. Just think – with no commercials, sitcom writers can now abandon the standard formula which still decrees an opening 30-second teaser, first sequence ending in suspense, second ending with some sort of resolution and a 30-second coda which elaborates the moral or adds a last joke.

From now on video cassette recording means that television is no longer the ephemeral art. At last the chances of the only copy of a program disappearing are small. If VCR had existed in the '50s we would now be able to compare the 1950s *Les Plouffe* to the 1980s reworking of it to see how our national perspectives on both cultures have changed. As it is, all but one of these episodes has disappeared.

With VCR, Canadian television will have a past as well as a present. Producers and writers, technicians and actors will be proud of the achievements of their predecessors, be able to learn from mistakes made, and build on the accomplishments of others, as filmmakers can. More of them will stop reinventing the wheel. Over the years they will also be able to assume a public more knowledgeable in the conventions of the form and critics who can place their work in a context.

In the 1980s, critics will be expected to evaluate programs after several viewings, not just one. General theories of television aesthetics can now be tested against the actual programs and conclusions about television's content, effect, quality and conventions can be independently verified. Television criticism should become as rigorous a discipline as film or theatre criticism.

When drama cassettes are sold off the shelf, the critic could influence sales, as book reviewers do bestsellers. On the other hand, viewers with their own reasonable copies of programs will be able to evaluate the evaluators and, if they don't agree with the critic, simply wipe the purchase and tape something else.

Continuity, comparison, and choice are the gifts of VCR technology to audiences, critics and the creative people who tell us the stories about ourselves that identify us to one another.

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LETTERS

Sexism up front

The following letter was received concerning the cover issue of No. 86.

It's nice to be shown that "a new generation poised for action" is strictly male.

What a sexist cover!

Claire Yeung
Sharron Maillot
Catherine Le Riguer
Paris

There were several women filmmakers invited to the initial filmmakers roundtable, and others who participated in the discussions. Unfortunately, all declined to be present for the photo, as did several men – all not wishing the exposure a cover shoot would give them.

Ed.

H.O.T.S. promo

I was reading your June 1982 *Cinema Canada* magazine (No. 85) and noticed on page 16 under Cannes Clips the photo of two young ladies on the beach in Cannes with an indication that the photographer could not remember the title of the film they were promoting. In actuality the film is a Manson film titled *H.O.T.S.* which we promoted at the Cannes Festival in 1980. You are actually running an older photograph.

The two ladies are two of the stars of the film, K.C. Winkler (on the right) and Angela Aames...

Michael F. Goldman
Manson International