

Rock video:

The return to

film's first principles

by Sam Zero

The rock video has been getting a great deal of press and air time recently. In the October issue of *Cinema Canada*, John Harkness has even attempted, however prematurely, to define a morphology for this new genre which necessarily borrows from every previous medium while finding its own particular characteristics. Genre, then, is the essential factor Harkness fails to discover: the characteristic entity of rock video's attempts to discover genres within the formal whole. This intrinsic value of the RV is inherent both in rock'n'roll and in the first principles of the two-dimensional moving image, as Harkness shows in his historical reference to D.W. Griffith, but not in its placement in time nor in geography. Harkness places the RV's visual development before Griffith's shorts, but it is more analogous to the time of Griffith's major contributions and their effect on the experiments of Lev Kuleshov in revolutionary Russian filmmaking.

A genre is something that carries its own nature and mood; in short, it has a style or personality all its own within a formalistic and contextual framework. What Harkness achieves is the insinuation of various rock video forms within the whole RV network, failing to realize that there is a common thread in all the videos that is both filmic and characteristic of a burgeoning form. (Whether an evaluation as art can or should even be raised at this stage is another question.) The thing that is important here is that there is nothing intrinsically 'video' about RVs, yet they are still entrenched in the cinematic - that is, they find their fuel for expression, or expressionlessness, in aspects of creation that are not particular to video but to film. Thus it is too soon to translate the RV genre into a theory of its form and structure before determining whether that structure is capable of being studied through any characteristic that makes the language of that structure particular to it: is there a video morpheme?

As Harkness points out, most RVs do not even attempt to find one. However, it is possible to discover an intrinsic, though cinematic, characteristic that is particular to rock video and has its roots firmly planted in visual history. In so doing it may become possible for the video creator to attack the medium's form and find in it an expressive factor that video as a medium can bring forth; I feel, however, that they will be hard pressed to find one. The video line, unlike the film frame is not perceptible as a coherent image to an audience, and

even if it were there would be the movie's still frame to which it would relate. The sound on video is even more like the radio or the amplified speaker than film sound. The colour and compositional aspects of both media will always parallel painting. But RVs have managed to rescue from all of this the one aspect of visual style that makes film (I use film for obvious reasons) different from any of its feeder forms.

It has been said that film started as an attempt to increase the reality and immediateness of an image. (Film, here, is that transitory object layered with emulsion that captures an event in still, deathlike, exactitude.) The photograph, of course, opened new paths for formalistic painting and experimentation in the 'finer arts' because a portrait or landscape could be 'taken' as seen and often hand-tinted later. At these early stages, studies of motion were made and toys of various descriptions were invented to create the illusion of motion. Finally the celluloid strip arrived and the still, black and white, image came to life - it moved. There is nothing more central to film than this one simple, though at the time devastating, fact, or to video at this point. It seems that this factor became so acceptable so fast that its value is overlooked: what is the value of motion?

Energy = motion X cinema²

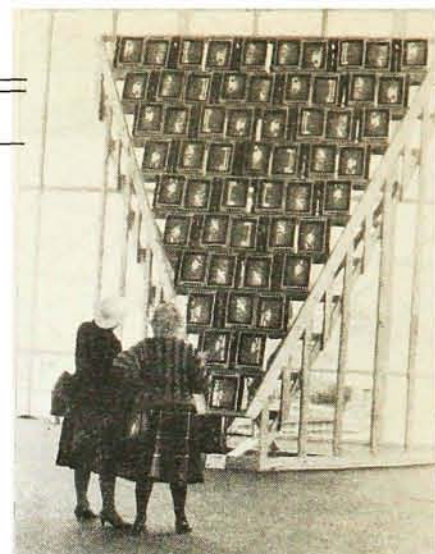
Motion is a process of constant change. Anything that moves must, by the nature of motion, be forever changing in relation to time and space. Add to this the various internal processes of the mind embodied in intellect and emotion, and one has discovered the tools of cinema. The celluloid strip moves with a constant rhythm through the projector (or the tape through the VCR), the perceiving eye's persistence of vision transforms the still frames into moving pictures, and the events that pass on the screen form intellectual and/or emotional associations in the viewer. Change is the essential factor in the effect of film be it slow, such as is witnessed in Andy Warhol's *Sleep* and *Empire State*, or sudden, such as the exploding violence of a great many contemporary pictures, or a combination of both. It is no wonder then that Lev Kuleshov, after seeing the American's use of editing, adopted the principles of montage as the single most cinematic characteristic of film and experimented with it with students like Pudovkin and Eisenstein. The edit is a sudden, often imperceptible change within the slower transient nature of the celluloid strip. The edit allowed jumps in time and place and, as Kuleshov theorized and Eisenstein and Pudovkin proved, intellectual and emotional stimuli by pacing, image construction and montage.

The rock video is packed with these

expressive cuts from one image to the next in a desperate attempt to stimulate the audience beyond the music and lyrics. But the beat goes on in prominence. Rock moves with a constant rhythm cut, interwoven with rifts and synthetic sounds, and these elements are the showcase items along with the performing stars. The directors and editors of the videos themselves have adopted an appropriate rhythmic style, fast and forever changing, like Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*. What they appear to lack is the ability to bring the depth of imagery to any potent level of connected association - it inevitably serves to make the songs more tangible and the image more forgettable. There is a great deal of effect-oriented imagery in RVs: breaking telephone receivers, extreme close-ups on eyes, and sidewalk squares that light up, but they maintain a strictly surface value that leads ever back to the musician, the music and the lyric, or destroys these three elements for the listener by drumming up contrary visual associations to those imagined when at home with the record or compact disc. The rock visual image is often pure fantasy, surreal in nature and rich by design, but it has come second and remains secondary to the selling factor of star and music.

Harkness writes of the few daring musicians who have made videos without emphasis on themselves, though the music still stands out as primary. Now that the RV is a fast financial success, as film was at its inception not 100 years ago, musicians will doubtless compose with images in mind. This wholistic approach is a key process in the creation of audio-visual works of any note. Yet, there is the question of the video medium taking on its own personality separate from radio, painting, theatre, photography, and film. Outside of computer graphics, the effects of which can be accomplished through animation on film, video has little to call its own. It is, in a sense, in a vacuum surrounded by the rest of the forms of cultural communication, not the least of which is film. There is one central difference, however, which is linked to videos dwelling within this identity vacuum.

After the video image has made the trek through the wires to the picture tube, it is projected via cathode rays through the vacuum to the screen. This entire process is immediate and the image has begun its motion even as the video lines are beamed onto the screen. It is faster, in every way, than film: cost, production to screen time, editing and accessibility; one need not get dressed and go out to see video. Video incorporates all previous media and reaches every possible audience. It is a means of communication between people and other people, nation and nation, people



SPECIAL REPORT

and computers. It can inform, teach and entertain. Video is very much a 'popular' medium borrowing its output from its immediate surroundings and changing with the times.

Video is the natural medium for the visual expression of rock. Since rock'n'roll first hit the music scene it has always affected or reflected popular social trends, and quite often caused some. Rock has, like television, seldom set out to be too political or philosophical. It is only recently with the ever-increasing popularity of the anti-nuclear and the welcome realization of the political force behind women's issues, that rock has begun to take these things into its repertoire, expanding beyond the simple minded babybaby-lust, brutality, and jilted idiot songs, which unfortunately will always exist unless some wonderful transformation take place. Similarly television has taken on these new popular subjects at a time when the two media, rock and video, have realized their natural affinity. Perhaps this media-merger will help insure that these topics do not go the way of obscurity like so many fads of fashion; it cannot help but raise the social awareness of a greater majority of the public by the osmosis of message into media that must occur to achieve a recognizable quality. Thus, the social reality will take a stronger step forward, be it through revelations of individual psychic or communal relationships.

In this affinity between rock and video lies the all-encompassing entity that is the morpheme of video and video technology: the single factor that can create or destroy an effective communication. For years both have infiltrated the cultural strata and now that video is becoming a central force in communications, the rock industry is using it to sell. But because each is a universalizing social phenomena, the sudden world-wide accessibility to both, through the satellite dish, has brought them under the critical eye, which tests the value of that which has the potential to be meaningful. Video and rock have always had that potential by their ever-present influence on the modern society. It is in this social sphere that video finds its personality: its own particular strength. The transient vacuous identities of video and rock assure them creative immortality. They achieve this quality in their situation as culturally affected and effective entities. It has come time to take a closer practical look at each of them within that framework. In doing so it will demand of them a culturally-responsible creativity. ●

* It is important to understand that by culture I mean the whole breadth of social action - a point of semiology too often forgotten for an elitist understanding of the word as art.