Well, It's a Heck of a Long Way From 'Marcus Welby'

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Television, the most potent medium of mass communication since the movable type, has languished throughout its history in the bind of big money and small imaginations, advancing steadily in its technical resources while remaining, in the context and especially the form of its actual performance, practically static. So goes the constant theme of what might be called the video visionaries—artistic and intellectual types inside and (mostly) outside the industry who have been frustrated down through the years by the persistent gap between their vision of television's potential as a formal and expressive medium and the delayed level of its actual performance, a gap they have been powerless to affect. That is, until recently.

The sudden availability of cheap video-tape equipment and the dizzying prospects of a "cassette revolution" and universal cable television in the not-too-distant future are at last presenting the visionaries with the chance to prove their point, and the general revolution in TV—if such it will be—is under way. Already talented individuals and groups both public and private around the country have begun tinkering with the medium in ways that might horrified a professional station manager, but that any artist would immediately recognize as the essential groundwork of creation. Perhaps the most ambitious and—at the age of three—among the most versatile of these new groups is the National Center for Experiments in Television, a semi-autonomous outfit loosely connected with educational station KQED in San Francisco and also funded through the umbrella organization of American educational TV, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

A sort of workshop-commune with a shifting population of artists and technicians and a permanent staff of 10, NCET (originally the Experimental Television Project) was set up last year in San Francisco by Wells Street, a small but good-funding foundation and has been directed since its inception by Bruce Howard, a former executive producer for National Educational Television. And the center's "mission"—as described by Paul Kaufman, administrative head—is threefold: First, and most important, artistic "pure research," by resident and invited artists (including painters, sculptors, poets, dancers, composers); second, the training (or, rather, indoctrination) of public-TV technicians, given intensive monthly "intermittences" at the center, and, third, the production of video tapes for possible distribution. As of now, according to Kaufman, NCET has about 50 hours of more or less finished tape programs, only a fraction of which have been broadcast anywhere—and, judging from the aesthetic radicalism of samples I was shown, not many more are likely to hit the home screens very soon.

NCET is a heady, evangelical, determined avant-garde enterprise, committed at once to uninhibited exploratory gamingplay with studio equipment and to lofty theorizing about media and society—a sort of electronic Bauhaus. Its central notion seems to be that, until now, TV has been conceived not as a medium in itself but as a conduit for other arts, crafts and media, including journalism, radio, film and theater. The aim is thus to show what capacities, aside from the simultaneous transmission of images and sound, are unique to television, then to exploit these capacities to the full.

To this end, everyone connected with the project is urged to do as he likes with any of its facilities, on the theory that the whims and fancies of stimulated people are more likely to get interesting results than those of bureaucrats and know-how of bureaucratised specialists. Meanwhile, a kind of think-tank atmosphere is also encouraged, a floating meeting of the social, political and philosophical ramifications of TV. Among their other assignments, intern technicians are expected to study relevant sections of Plato's "Republic."

Though NCET does not disdain theater altogether (it worked with the La Mama troupe last year on Paul Foster's "Dark Egret," a 60-minute experimental drama which was also shown on Channel 13), it focuses in its research on modes of pure abstraction, both in black and white and color, with emphasis on techniques that do not involve camera movement or that simply dispense with the camera (the better to get away from cinema). Among the former are "super forms," whereas a criterion-kinded surface of mirrored acetate played on by shifting lights yields a kaleidoscope of ephemeral forms and colors, and "feedback," which involves pointing cameras directly into their own monitors and produces an incredible variety of effects.

But NCET's "most" project is "direct video," a camera-less method being pioneered by a 22-year-old electronics whiz named Stephen Beck, which enables an intricate, seemingly limitless instant abstraction. "Point of Inflection," a hypnotically beautiful direct video collaboration between Beck and electronic composer Richard Feliciano, is easily among the first indubitables art works ever created with, rather than for, television.

I would not suggest that any sort of artistic millennium is emerging from all this activity, which has yet to come up with anything not prefigured to some degree in modern art or film. Indeed, it is possible that NCET's advance on the esthetics of previous innovations—in light-producing art objects, abstract painting and kinetic sculpture, light shows and the animated film—may finally prove to be mainly technical, a quicker and easier way of getting the same effects. And it is probably too much to hope that NCET's assault on the "trained incapacies" of technicians in its intern program will have any immediate effect on the courage and quality of regular TV broadcasting. Timidity and mediocrity are undoubtedly too ingrained in the system.

But the spunk and intelligence so far shown by this nervy little project, which is even now seeking funds to create a network of similar workshops throughout the country (one is already established at Southern Methodist University in Dallas), bodes well for the future of independent television, which may be expected to really boom when all the requisite "software" is on sale at reasonable prices and cassette distribution is a fact. Meanwhile, we will probably be seeing some second-hand fruits of NCET's elevated research before long in any number of TV commercials—ad agencies being too date, alas, the creative conscience of network television.

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