In My Opinion

Format — Who Sets the Pace?

Michael G. Jeffrey

My formal affiliation with video began about ten years ago with the Sony "CV" series of videotape recorders. I totally bypassed the maze of "old" one-inch videotape formats. Half-inch video then was about as wild with formats as half-inch cassettes are today, but all that changed with the introduction of EIAJ standard format half-inch open-reel VTRs. Soon, video-cassettes arrived and, in spite of a few renegades, a U-Matic format emerged across brand names: with some degree of success, tapes copied on one brand could be played back on another brand of videotape recorder. More recently, the manufacturers of the "new" one-inch VTRs agreed upon the "type-C" format, after much prodding from Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers. Again, reason came to video.

However, like Mount St. Helen's which laid idle for several years, the video volcano erupted again. First came Betamax and later VHS — but, surely we could cope with only two more choices. Then (and I am not really sure which event came first) VHS subdivided into standard play and long-play formats which are not interchangeable with each other. Sony fueled the fire with Beta-II and Beta-III, and a half-speed, something I call Beta-IV and Beta VI. At AMTEC '81, we were shown a quarter-inch VCR, and soon to follow are the self-contained camera/VTR packages. Some will argue that these are only "consumer" formats, but low price and availability make consumer formats very attractive to schools and training institutions. (Incidentally, the original "CV" series VTR stood for consumer video.)

Perhaps there would be hope with that new creation, videodisc. Quite the contrary, disc is at least as bad as tape: there are two laser configurations (reflective and refractive) and two mechanical formats (capacative groove and capacative grooveless). Moreover there are several potentially incompatible approaches to each of these four formats. Who will bring reason to this chaos?

Large companies like General Motors, Ford or Chrysler have large distribution networks under their control. In each case, a head office decision selects a format and then identical units are bought at bargain prices to supply to every point in the network. Many video producers and distributors are not so fortunate. My department supplies programming to a large number of independent school boards and training institutions, each of which ultimately makes its own independent purchasing decisions. As a result, we supply programs in half-inch op reel (color, black and white), three-quart inch U-Matic, Beta-I and VHS-standard pl formats. We have "narrowed" the field these formats, but the diversity limits the terchange of programs among schools a results in needless duplication of tap holdings.

Videotape is not the only villain. AMTEC '81, many presentations and equi ment displays featured the variety of mic computer formats which are not easily ma compatible. In business education cours we witness the confusion of audio casset and dictation-format tapes. In individualiz learning programs, manufacturers have p pared total packages of software and ha ware which are restricted to that compan product line.

This issue of incompatibility was raised the Manufacturers Panel of Video Ex Canada last September. One individual fr the audience blithely suggested that t number of available products was so gr and confusing that future growth change) should be stopped — that is not o radical, but short-sighted. The suggesti that the manufacturers themselves have responsibility to standardize their devel ment efforts was unanimously rejected the panel which represented Hitachi, Pa sonic, JVC and Sony. Their suggestion w that we, the "consumers" should def standards as a result of, or by the lack of equipment purchases. Clearly, we are succeeding very well.

My first glimpse of the range of form problems was at a conference in Tru Nova Scotia in 1972. At AMTEC '81 (also Truro), Pierre Perusse challenged Canad media agencies to get together, possi through AMTEC, to share software, prod tion capability and to minimize the proble caused by equipment format. To take lib ties with Pierre's comments, I recomme that AMTEC begin to anticipate spec software and hardware needs so that our put is accepted early in the manufactur industry's research and development.

How about it? Are you content to what "they" offer to us? Surely, wit AMTEC, we have sufficient foresight technical initiative to define reasona standards. The manufacturers could m mize their overhead by concentrating more limited product lines and we wo benefit from simplified distribution netwo and more vigorous competitive bidding response to tenders. Surely, both sides co be ultimately winners.

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Reviews

Shirley Murray

THE RED DRESS / producers, Roman Kroitor and Dieter Nachtigall, 1978. National Film Board of Canada (distributor). 27:47 min. : sd., col.; 16mm. $380.

"The Red Dress," written by Maria Campbell, author of *Halfbreed* is a wonderful, but in some ways, terrible film. It's authentically native, obviously imbued through and through with the life and loves of Maria Campbell. Therein lie its strengths and weaknesses.

Kelly, a Metis, his teenaged daughter Theresa, and his mother, the traditional Kookum, live together on the edge of a national park. Kelly is unemployed, refusing to sell himself out to the White Man for money, and provides for his family by poaching in the park (a rather risky livelihood).

Theresa has seen a red dress in a store window and desperately wants it. In fact, she has even placed a deposit on it. It won't be a dress to be worn anywhere, but will be a symbol of strength for her, she says, like the bearclaw was to her locally-famous grandfather. Kelly tries to explain about their lack of money, but Theresa is adamant that this dress is important to her identity.

Kelly can all too readily sympathize with her need for a symbol of her identity, for he is definitely a middleman victim, torn between two societies, Indian and White. He is offered the security of a government job of questionable content, something to do with "getting a good deal for Indians who don't want help from the Government." In accepting the job, despite the good it will do his family, Kelly is conceding to the stereotypically bigotted White bureaucrat. He then goes all the way by selling his jacket, handmade by his mother, for fifty dollars to the most obnoxious of his new co-workers. The Kookum just utters a knowing "tsk" when he informs her that she'll have to start sewing again.

With the money, Theresa buys her red dress. When she models it for Kelly, he insists she wear it to the dance that night. Despite her protests that it's a symbol and not to be worn, he pushes her into a truck which conveniently arrives, deus-ex-machina fashion, and whisks her off to the dance. She flees from the dance early, and as she's walking home, is stopped by the man who bought Kelly's jacket. She's lured into his car and is offered beer and passion which he erroneously believes to be the aspirations of all young Native women. She refuses, escapes from his clutches and car while he curses, fumes and appears most disgruntled. In the process, the red dress and Theresa's pride are devastated. When she finally stumbles home in the morning, she is met by a frantic Kelly who slaps her and ironically accuses her of drinking and carrousing. She falls on the Kookum for consolation and then runs off. Kelly immediately realizes the error of his ways but the damage is already done and he has lost his daughter. The Kookum agrees with him but wisely notes that although he can say this, the words are not from the heart. He must go and smoke his pipe and get back in touch with the spirits.

The story is truly from the heart, but this presents problems in translation onto film.

Much of the film is blatantly contrived; there isn't the verisimilitude of events that one has come to expect in films. All Whitemen are insensitive boors still flaunting the rape-and-plunder-everything-within-reach mentality. However, this is rather a propos stereotype reversal after years of viewing monosyllabic Indians in blankets and feathers.

While the plight of this film is universal, the specifics of the story are not, and the film's biggest problem is its lack of background information necessary for everyone to fully comprehend the story. For example, understanding all aspects of what is implied in the differentiation between status and non-status Indians is paramount, but is only given the slightest lip service in the film. Knowledge of Indian spirituality is also important for appreciating the otherwise flat and meaningless ending.

If the viewers are sensitive to the culture, the film is meaningful and wonderful. If not, it doesn't make much sense. There is in it, the potential for expanding the horizons of non-Natives if they are willing to expend some energy in looking beyond their cultural identities. And, in doing so, they will be richer, for this film offers an insight into Native life — complete with its inimitable humor — that is rarely accessible by non-Natives.

If "The Red Dress" is to be used in the classroom, it would be most suitable for sophisticated grade nine or older students in English or social studies. The film works particularly well if used in conjection with *Halfbreed*. Its readers will readily identify the situation from which the film evolved. "The Great Spirit," another National Film Board film is helpful in understanding the spiritual aspects of "The Red Dress."

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THE GREAT SPIRIT / Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, directed and produced by Sig Gerber, 1975. National Film Board of Canada (distributor). 27:50 min. : sd., col.; $380.

While this is not a very recent film, its importance transcends its date. In Saskatchewan settings of great religious importance for Indians, Roy Bonisteel talks with Ernest Tootoosis, spiritual leader of the Crees.

Tootoosis describes the basic beliefs of the Cree and explains some of the rituals. He compares Manitou, the god of the Cree to the Christian god and elaborates upon the reverence of the elements — sun, wind, water and fire. While there are similarities between the beliefs of the Christians and Cree, the Cree did not have an Adam and Eve. So, in 1492 when the Whiteman arrived, the Cree were still living in paradi Man was humble and recognized he w merely a part of the environment, no grea or more important than the smallest sto There was no need to conquer natu Manitou provided everything the Cree ne ed. Since that time, the Cree have adopt Whiteman's ways and no longer live in h mony with nature. Nature is responding this disrespect by such phenomena polluted streams. Tootoosis feels that the ly hope for Indians today is to get back touch with their spirituality and re-establi the harmony with nature.

The information in this film is bountif cogently presented and offers a rare insig important for understanding Natives. In respects, it surpasses most other films on t same theme which are available now.

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