

Video Culture: A critical investigation.

(For: European Photography).

The above mentioned book, (a collection of essays on Video, under the guidance of John G. Hanhardt and the Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986), is an attempt to give an overall vision of the present video scene, a sort of focal point for various, (often contradictory), approaches. It contains "classical" analyses, (like Benjamin's and Brecht's), and very up to date contributions. An important part of the book is dedicated to attempts at video-definitions, (from TV on the one hand, from film on the other).

In a short survey like this, it is impossible to go into the individual papers. I shall therefore opt for a more general appraisal. One thing stands out after having read this publication: although video has become part and parcel of the everyday life of millions, (be it only in the form of cassettes), we are as yet incapable of appreciating its virtualities, and of taking advantage of them. There are many reasons for this handicap, and the outstanding one is that we are unable to free ourselves from the traditional concept "art", (which should be radically adapted not only to this form of communication, but to various others, like "computer art", if it is to be useful).

The editors have understood very clearly, that video cannot be understood in its own specificity, if it is confused with television and with film. In fact: by its technique and its intention, it is the very opposite of those two communication methods. Both TV and film are based on the notion of information distribution. There is a sender, (the TV and film producer), there are relays, (TV screens and movie theaters), and there are millions of receivers of the emitted message. Video is based on the notion of information elaboration. There is a dialogue between the man who holds the video camera, and those who are shown on the tape, and it is this dialogue which will result in the final message. But since video permits to be used for information distribution, (since it is shown on TV, since tapes are distributed by video clubs, and since it resembles in many ways a film tape), this dialogical virtuality of video is hidden from most of its users, (including most of those who have contributed to the book under discussion).

This is not a unique problem. Every time a new invention is made, it includes virtualities unknown to its inventor. (TV, for instance, was intended originally to be a visual telephone, and the film was originally intended to be a kind of moving photograph, not as a new theater form). But in video this blindness of ours as to its dormant virtualities, (it is, in fact, a political instrument which permits creative dialogue), is even more perturbing. I have an unfortunate feeling, after having read through this book, that it does not contribute very much toward a liberation of video from the original intentions of its inventors.

There is an explanation to this: if video were accepted as a political instrument, it would both do away with video producers, ("artists"), and with political ideologies, (representative democracy, elections and so forth). Now the contributors to this book are either producers or politically committed. It would

be to ask too much if we were to expect those people to advocate their own deposition. (Although a few among them, like Baudrillard and Rosalind Krauss), do seem to point into the direction here intended.

Let me resume my impression of the book as follows: It is a valuable contribution to our understanding of present video manipulations, and of past and present theoretical reflexions on them. It is not very useful for those who suspect that we have not yet really began with an appropriate video manipulation and with a philosophical reflexion on it.