Back in the Movement Again
By Nick DeMartino

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Once an annual rite of spring during most of the 70s, when I ran a community video center, the trek to the 1991 NAB Convention was my first in years. I was scouring the mammoth trade show floor with Ron McRae, who runs the Sony Video Center at The American Film Institute, in search of Macintosh-compatible video products for the institute's new AFI-Apple Computer Center, which would open in only a few months.

"There's someone you need to meet," said my colleague, dragging me to a wall of computers and video set-ups. "This guy has a board for the Mac that controls frame-by-frame output to videotape." We worked our way up to the guy, who was surrounded by a mob watching his demo.

"Nick, this is Howard Gustadt, who works for Diaquest."

It was in that moment at the National Association of Broadcasters convention in 1991 that the notion first formed, a *deja vu* sort of feeling that I was about to re-live the days of my early twenties as a foot soldier in the "alternative television movement."

Here was Howie, who I'd met in 1973, as a member of "People's Video Theatre"; Howie, who'd slept on the couch of my Washington, D.C. group house, when coming to videotape yet another anti-war rally; Howie who was part of that extended family of video freaks, as we were often derisively called by the Establishment, a founding member of the "alternative television movement." On the floor of the NAB selling a Macintosh add-on board.

We reminisced about the old days. And Gustadt revealed that there were, in fact, quite a few folks from the old video days who were involved with another technologically based movement built around the Mac. "This stuff is going to revolutionize the video business," he told me. Prescient words.

I had spent most of the previous six months immersed in a crash course one might call "Desktop 101: Your Mac and You." When Apple and the AFI had announced in June, 1990, that the two organizations would collaborate in the creation of a computer lab focusing on the creative needs of film and videomakers, I had no idea that I would be its first director, much less how many products from so many companies besides Apple would be required to make the vision a reality.

Holy Great Tomato!

This I'd discovered a few months earlier at my first Mac World Expo. Holy great tomato! How would I sort out the difference between a Pixar and a pixel, much less absorb the current and fast-changing world of the personal computer? Just an analog guy, adrift in a digital world.

Necessity being the mother of invention, solicitations were sent to hundreds of companies which made computer software, hardware peripherals and add-on boards, as well as conventional analog video products. All would be necessary if AFI was to fulfill the promise of

creating a facility that showcased what was being called the "desktop video revolution."

This revolution had been abrewing for some time now, with a video/computer product niche being created by pioneering companies like Truevision.

By 1991 the *cognoscenti* of the Mac world understood that the winning battle would soon be entered by Apple, with the introduction of QuickTime in a few months. That introduction would, as it happens, unfold on AFI's Los Angeles campus only two weeks after the opening of the AFI-Apple Computer Center, in May 1991.

Desktop passed me by

The *cognoscenti* may have known, but I didn't. Somehow, the desktop computer revolution had passed me by. Like most Americans, I, too saw Apple's half-million dollar spot on the 1984 Super Bowl, Ridley Scott's Orwellian evocation of how "the computer for the rest of us" would revolutionize a world dominated by computing's Big Brother (read: Big Blue, i.e., IBM). I would become vaguely aware that the personal computer had taken publishing by storm, and had heard that a little computer called Amiga had impressed several friends in broadcast design.

But I had not been infected by Macintoshitis, that weird cross between obsession and religion that turns otherwise normal productive professionals into zealots. I had never attended a user group, nor directly experienced the cultural gestalt of Silicon Valley, where people evidently found it possible to simultaneously worship Ayn Rand and Buckminster Fuller; where the act of wearing T-shirts (never a suit) was an article of faith, even while driving a $40,000 BMW; where legends emanate from garages, and the good ole days at Xerox PARC.

Even in 1991, hawkers at Mac World sold T-shirts emblazoned with a computer-nerd's parody of the famous PSA: "Here is your brain...Apple logo...Here's is your brain on drugs....IBM logo." A world of orthodoxy set out by true believers had long since lost its appeal to this veteran of many

movements, but I began to visualize the contours of a "movement" in the Macintosh community into which my new job had thrust me.

An earlier revolution

At the NAB, it was comforting to be amidst the block-long booths occupied by familiar companies whose names brought back a flood of memories from more a more youthful time when it was, in fact, Sony, Panasonic and JVC whose products were fueling an earlier technologically based revolution.... the alternative television movement. The small-format video revolution. The community television movement.

I first discovered those phrases during what we affectionately called "Weatherman summer," the summer of 1970, when as a fresh college graduate I moved to Washington, D.C. for my first job---editor of the College Press Service. With long hair, press credentials reluctantly granted by both Congress and the White House press corps, I wrote stories that appeared in the college press on the cataclysmic movement and the reaction to it---the bombing of the Army math research building at the University of Wisconsin was that fall, as was the Nixon-appointed commission on "campus unrest" that occurred as the Administration sought to "wind down the war in Vietnam" by bombing Cambodia into oblivion. *That* was a movement.

We were on many mailing lists, so I'd grown accustomed to monitoring both the underground and mainstream of America's wacko culture of the era. Into my hands came an oddly oversized, blueprint-style printed journal called *"Radical Software."* The cover headline proclaimed "the alternate television movement" and a graphic of a video wave-form.

Inside were underground-paper style "articles," manifestoes, interviews, excerpts...by people who would later become friends and colleagues in the video movement: Nam June Paik, the Korean-born fine-arts video pioneer; Michael Shamberg, the leader of Raindance that published Radical Software, who went on to found the seminal documentary group TVTV, and later still a successful motion picture producer; Gene Youngblood, whose "Expanded Cinema" defined the boundaries of the new movement in the context of conventional film history, and many others.

There were ads for Ralph Lee Smith's issue-length article from *The Nation*, called "The Wired Nation," that linked video production to the about-to-explode cable TV distribution industry; and ads for Global Village and The Groove Tube "video theaters." There were jeremiads against CBS's weird film cassette technology---EVR is Evil!!! And there was a long interview with patron saint Bucky Fuller, the first time I'd encountered the word "software."

It would not be the last.

Look What They Done to My Brain, Ma!

I was so taken with this "movement" that I proposed to my college-editor colleagues that we devote the group's annual spring conference to the electronic media. "Look What they Done to My Brain, Ma!" was the conference, which numbered among its speakers radical historian Herbert Marcuse and CBS Vice President Perry Lafferty, TelePrompter cable VP Bill Bresnan, and a gaggle of videofreaks --most from Northern California in a place which would later be called Silicon Valley.

They wired the Sheraton Universal Hotel with helical scan black-and-white video, and "broadcast" proceedings like a confrontation between society ladies, Bob Hope, and gay liberationists from the Berkeley campus paper dressed in tutus. All in good fun during the halcyon days of "alternative" television when we reveled in capturing on tape content which had never before been recorded.

Hooked on video!

I was hooked. From there I took my own version of this religion back to Washington, D.C., where I found a group of like-minded folk and proceeded to start the first "community" video center, premised not only on making tapes with the new "portapaks" from Sony and JVC, but "educating" the community about the coming of cable TV. We were deeply involved in browbeating various arms of the Establishment, winning battles to assure the reservation of public access channels on cable, and the

alteration of FCC and PBS broadcast engineering standards to permit the airing of helical scan, time-base-corrected video signals.

And we were wild about networking, as we called it, with great ironic reference to those many considered the mortal enemy---network TV, that top-down, centralized Big Brother of American culture that was ruining our brains on their three stations (sometimes we included educational stations, not yet a network; parts of PBS became an ally to independents, albeit somewhat reluctantly.)

Our video center was in D.C., so we were natural networkers, since people using video would drift through town to demonstrate against a never-ending war, or to apply for an NEA grant, or to take a meeting with some potential federal patron. We began reporting on innovations in grassroots video, from guerrilla broadcast stations in small New York towns and along the California coasts, to committees established to influence city councils, which were about to face the onslaught of cable companies seeking exclusive franchises. This evolved into a periodical called *TeleVISIONS.*

The "movement" phase of video didn't last all that long, really, subject to the sorts of jealous spats, ideological splits, and personal vendettas of almost all movements. (Some movements just ossify, like the labor movement where I spent much of the 80s trying, with fellow video pioneer Larry Kirkman, to bring the lessons of the70s video movement....well, at least we avoided the Reagan revolution that seemed to captivate most yuppies.)

Slow American Eyeballs

In 1972 TVTV covered the Democratic and Republican national conventions in Miami with crews comprised of virtually everybody in the movement with a Portapak. Eventually carried on some public TV stations, this work was immortalized by then-VP of programming at NBC, Paul Klein: "America won't buy this. Their eyeballs don't move fast enough."

In a matter of months, the group had a contract to produce broadcast TV in color, and were accused of "selling out." A standard epithet: I attended my first meeting of community media centers after taking joining AFI in

1991. An old videofreak friend eyeballed my badge, rolled her eyes and said, "My god Nick, you've sold out." Right.

By the late 70s, people got jobs, and small-format video became commonplace, with ENG at TV stations, and the real action in professional video moving into the multi-billion-dollar corporate marketplace, now under siege by the desktop video revolution, which of course, threatens some rather sizable investments and the economics of a mature business, not to mention readers of this magazine.

There's something beautifully symmetrical, I must note, about the timing. It was in 1981 when Sony entered into its long-standing relationship with The American Film Institute, building a corporate video training center on the then-new AFI Hollywood headquarters, and sponsoring the first AFI National Video Festival. Like museum retrospectives, the Festival, run by Larry Kirkman, AFI's first video and TV director, validated the early pioneering art, community video, and video movement practitioners. It was glorious. Almost exactly 10 years later, AFI inaugurated its relationship with Apple and desktop video, and with cooperation of Sony and other video products manufacturers, began teaching a new generation of tools. I love the symmetry of history.

Flash-forward to Atchley

Flash-forward to November, 1992, when Harry Marks, the legendary broadcast designer who now serves as the creative director of AFI's advanced technology program and I were invited to participate in the opening day's events at the "first-ever" developers conference of 3DO, the new multimedia box from videogames pioneer Trip Hawkins. We arrive for dinner with Hal Josephson, a 3DO evangelist and himself a veteran of video, and Dana Atchley, a long-haired videohippie who'd been bitten with the Mac bug.

Getting to know each other a bit, we were all overjoyed to discover that everybody still had black-and-white reel-to-reel videotapes in storage---- some, in fact, in the pre-70s CV standard!! Video pioneers, all, preparing to deliver a message to hundreds of computer and games programmers. Our message: people don't buy boxes, they buy stories, characters,

movies. To an audience that takes for granted camcorders, 8-bit color, joysticks, and other technology, the next leap will not be driven by hardware alone, but by what Silicon Valley loves to call *content.*

Harry I and were stunned by the performance of Dana Atchley, who mixes much of the movement and counter-culture ethos of the early video days with a firm grasp of these new computer technologies---technology with a beating heart, he says. He's a storyteller with the voice of Garrison Keillor, the timing of Lily Tomlin, and the sensibility of Hunter Thompson. We booked him on the spot for the AFI 12th National Video Festival---networking lives!!

It was at Dana's AFI show, workshop productions and screenings (described elsewhere in this issue by participant Michael Wiese) where I really began to search for the similarities and differences in these media "movements," and started seeking out people who have lived through both.

Access to Tools

At the heart of both is the technologically enabling power of access to tools, the rallying cry of the *Whole Earth Catalog* (which was succeeded by a retail operation in northern California built on selling computers). Our battle in the 70s was for expanding access to the means of producing television---put simply, the tools from Sony and JVC knocked zeros off the entry level cost of producing. The hardware once cost $500,000; portapaks and small-format editing could render a broadcast production with an investment of $50,000. QuickTime knocks another zero off, roughly.

QuickTime is a nifty bit of software which, among other things, brings video in a compressed digital form into the Macintosh , thereby allowing a person with a $5,000 desktop computer and some software to emulate video editing and effects previously available only on systems costing at least ten times that amount. The 1993 NAB convention, it should be noted, featured a "multimedia" show (NAB realizes that the only parties making money off multimedia to date are show planners).

The next George Lucas

With 80 million PCs out there, and the ability bring video onto the desktop, we've just expanded the universe of talent geometrically, even from the low-cost industrial video level. The next George Lucas will be a videogames kid with a camcorder, a Mac, and Premiere---or their successors.

Randy Ubillos thinks that. Randy is one of those kids, really, the inspired computer programmer who created Premiere. "It's exciting," he told me, describing his new life with one foot in the computer culture, another in video. "Not only am I meeting film and video professionals I'd never dreamed of meeting, but I know the work I'm doing will have an impact on thousands of people who would never have had the chance to produce a video before."

That evangelical zeal. We had it in the 70s. We could (and, actually did) change the world, stopped the war, cleaned up the environment, gave TV power to the people. Etc.

Evangelism or Co-optation?

Of course, the "Macintosh Way," as immortalized by the book of the same name by the omnipresent Guy Kawasaki, was a marketing concept virtually built into Apple's products. Children of the 60s and 70s, growing up in the same culture that spawned the video movement, Jobs, Wozniak, and their progeny were smart enough to understand the profound love-hate relationship many of the baby boomers had with technology. So Apple didn't sell its computers like IBM, it "evangelized." (In the 70s, we called it co-optation, but that's another story.) Evangelism is the art of helping customers visualize why they can't live without your product. An evangelist is a salesman without a quota.

Easy to take pot shots from the left, but the reality is that evangelism was a bona fide response to American business practices, and dare I say it, the way we received technology from the Japanese during the heyday of the video movement. They invented, we used. I remember driving to the air

freight terminal at Dulles Airport outside D.C. to pick up what was probably the second color JVC portapak in the U.S. We were thrilled, of course. Color! But we had little to do with its feature set, price, or standards. That was already decided for us in Tokyo.

Touching the end users

Contrast that with the relationships we enjoy with American companies following the Macintosh evangelical approach. QuickTime was unveiled at the AFI in the heart of Hollywood by Apple six months before it shipped. Students at AFI produced videos on beta versions of QuickTime, Adobe Premiere, and SuperMac's VideoSpigot three months before the products shipped, in collaboration with product managers and other staff from SuperMac, who took what they heard back to the engineering lab. There is an very close relationship between end users, developers, and manufacturers which is virtually unknown in the video world, and which extends the feeling of access that we sense in this new movement.

This is the premise for AFI's unique "computer media salons," which came from the gestalt of the co-chairs of the center's advisory committee. Mike Backes, a few years younger than I, comes from motion pictures, both screenwriting and special effects. He's deeply involved with the Mac culture, and has taught me its foibles. Scott Billups, about my age, is the only guy I know with his ticket to Woodstock framed in his kitchen. He'd been doing video probably as long as me, but was way ahead of traditional video folks in understanding the implications of the desktop revolution, and has mastered the integration of the two technologies. (Regular readers know his iconoclastic views from his "Bleeding Edge" column in *Videography* .)

AFI has been the recipient of the largesse of these companies because they know that buyers are far more likely to be influenced by peers than salesmen. Seeing how Scott or Mike uses DeBabelizer or Premiere sells more units than a slick trade show package. (By the way, nobody accuses anyone in this movement of selling out. The whole point is selling, and almost everyone works for a company, or is yearning to do so, preferably right before the initial public stock offering...The roots of movements are quite different.)

Hollywood and the Buzzwords

And so, I find myself in the midst of another movement. It started with the desktop video revolution, but now extends into that much-dreaded territory of new buzzwords: convergence, interactive, multimedia, the digital highway. I regularly see, at AFI, people from the studios, networks, production companies, and other majors who fear, more than the technology they don't understand, getting behind the pace of change, change driven by technology and a movement they aren't really part of. Hence, the recent feeding frenzy along the edge of the soon-to-be-built digital highway.

AFI has set up a new group, the Advanced Technology Council, as a way of reaching both Hollywood and Silicon Valley. This may be a movement involving both communities, but they are not talking to each other much. The Council, chaired by *T2*'s Jim Cameron and John Warnock, head of Adobe Systems, has the goal of building bridges between these groups, both professional and social. Our next event is at Digital World in June. Come join us!

I get much joy by rediscovering old friends from my independent film and video movement days who have joined this new digital movement. People like:

• Award-winning animator, Eli Noyes, now with Colossal Pictures, who is doing a Broderbund interactive living book for kids.

• Art-video pioneer John Sanborn, who segued from doing videos using the Amiga and NewTek's fabulously successful Toaster, who won the QuickTime Video Festival Grand Prize with an extraordinary music video using SuperMac's Digital Film, CoSA's After Effects, and VideoFusion.

• Jon Leland (known in the old days as Dancing Bear), with whom I covered those '72 conventions, whose corporate video business is now entirely within the digital domain, and produced the Desktop Video *Video.*

• Stephen Beck, who broadcast live video synthesis from KQED in the 70s, and now helps edit wacko culture-mag *Mondo2000* and works for Lapis Technology, pushing a new product called LTV.

• My old bud, film/videomaker Maxi Cohen, who's moved from Soho to Venice, CA, and whose work on South Central LA with a multi-racial group of community people may also appear as an interactive title.

We join in yet another movement, perhaps from nostalgia? Because the tools are cool? Perhaps as a reaction to the deathly 80s? Or, I believe, for the reasons Dana Atchley inspires us with his extraordinary video-tinged performance art....because we can change the world. For whatever reason, we're back in the movement again, and, I for one, feel right at home.

Eli Noyes put it this way: "It feels like a blissful return to a one-on-one relationship to the tools, which is what the independent film movement was about. We thought with the tools, and access to eyes and ears of the country, that individuals could create works of significance *and* get artistic satisfaction. Were we naive? We may be naive again."

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