

Appreciating Still Video

Just imagine how threatened painters felt when Daguerre first introduced daguerreotypes to the French Assembly back in 1839, and how alarmed they became when daguerreomania became the buzzword of the day. Well, they should not have over-fretted because daguerreotypes were relatively shortlived while the art of painting prospers even to this day and with no end in sight. However, Daguerre's discovery and invention did not recede without having started a major revolution in the visual arts and sciences.

The list of offspring is long indeed and continues to expand from the calotypes, cyanotypes, dry plates and glass plates to the latest in silver halide T-grain emulsions, variable grade printing papers, dye destruction reversal, and instant Polaroids. The latest Johnny-come-lately goes by either still electronic photography or by still video and is showing great promise in providing its share of controversy. But while the pros and cons battle it out let's take the time to appreciate this new medium in its temporarily primitive form.

Library shelves are loaded with archives of photographic records made with a variety of devices and methods. And while these photographs are appreciated for their content, it would be a shame to overlook their other inherent characteristic, their form. The form of any visual medium is as important as the information it tries to convey. Certain processes and their materials impart a definite look and feeling to an image whose effect would most likely be quite different were it captured with another medium. Still Electronic Photography is as unique and worthy of appreciation as any of its predecessors.

Most of the attention devoted to the revolutionary technology of capturing, processing and outputting images electronically is directed toward the ability of transmitting the information across previously prohibitive barriers and the speed of the process. These are certainly worthy and important factors; however, once this side of the rat race and as time is devoted to explore the new frontiers of creativity, still video can prove to be a very exciting medium with nearly unlimited capabilities.

Even within the new category of still video itself, the high level of competition among the manufacturers of both hardware and software has produced an array of various results each more compatible with specific applications than the others. Among the diverse factors in the image capture process is the possible choice of the frame mode which yields twice the resolution than its alternative field mode, whose advantage is twice the amount of images.

Once recorded, an image can be directly viewed on a monitor, printed onto hardcopy, or be subjected to a dizzying amount of digital manipulation on any number of computer systems. Software engineering continues to provide ever more complex tools to bring obsolescence to the term reality.

The choices do not end here however. Once satisfied with the image on the screen, the photographer (?), art director, graphic designer, or whoever will be assigned the new job may choose from a variety of output formats including ink-jet or thermal printers, each with a totally different interpretation of the same image. The only barrier at this stage in the evolution of the technology is the prohibitive cost of complete systems.

Whether still video will be improved beyond resemblance of its current form, or whether it will be scrapped and replaced by other newer technologies, we owe it to ourselves and to future generations to appreciate what we have now. And the best way to do so is to take a look for yourself; however, keep in mind not to expect to see what has been up to now called a photograph.

Lucien Samaha, 1989