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AFI festival explores the evolution of video

Focus of presentations is international

By Hunter Drohojowska

While the major networks are unloading their fall season, if you're not a fan of "Partners in Crime," you may find an antidote at the National Video Festival, sponsored by Sony Corp. and opening today at the American Film Institute in Hollywood. The focus is international: you'll see selected demonstrations of the way other cultures see, or at least videotape, the world around them.

The festival, today through Sunday, features 150 tapes (some 70 hours worth), two panels (one on Central America and another on "The Image of Music") and numerous in-person presentations. Tickets are \$15 per day or \$50 for the entire event.

The four-day event addresses the evolution of television from its formative years in America after World War II (with a presentation by Robert Rosen) to excerpts selected by John Wyver from Britain's innovative Channel 4. Established two years ago, Channel 4 has a mandate to program experimental work. For example "Alter Image," an arts magazine format, includes pithy bits on Japan's extraordinary group Sankaijuku, clad only in white paint and dancing in the Battersea Power Station, followed by Jim Whiting's grotesque mannequin robots who head for a disco. The program aims for a fresh, fast-paced approach, sort of an MTV for art.

Another highlight of the festival for those unfamiliar with the history of experimental video will be "There's a Videocassette in the Soup," a survey of video art by Belgian directors Chris Dercon and Stefaan Decostere.

The Americans are leaders in music with "Rock My Religion,"

conceptual artist Dan Graham's thesis of rock as religion. Music is provided by Glenn Branca and Sonic Youth. There are also tapes by Talking Heads as well as temporary opera and a tone poem based on Thomas Hardy's "Return of the Native."

Politics is the most salient aspect of the European video, but it is examined on the American side as well by Peter Broderick's presentation on advocacy programming and a panel, screenings and discussions on "Nicaragua and El Salvador: Art and Activism, Urgency and Ethics."

But what about entertainment? The section called "Public Television: Politics, Fiction and Fantasy" includes five remarkable segments, all full-length video features, all pushing the boundaries of established form and content. Berlin filmmaker Michael Klier's "Der Riese" ("The Giant") creates a chilling drama with footage drawn from surveillance monitors in banks, stores and traffic intersections, backed by music ranging from classical to jazz.

"Overdrawn at the Memory Bank," directed by Douglas Williams for the American Playhouse series, targets more American concerns. Raul Julia plays Aram Fingal, who, like everyone else in the fictionalized future, works for Novicorp, a communications industry city-state. Zany computer graphics enhance the imaginative fantasy.

The first episode from BBC's "Boys from the Blackstuff," a series about the unemployed in Liverpool that proved wildly popular in England in 1982, demonstrates that public television need not be elitist. "Russian Artistic Experiment" by Yugoslavian artists Boris Mijlkovic and Branimir Dimitrijevic, tells the stories of avant-garde artists Malevich, Tatlin and Diaghilev with



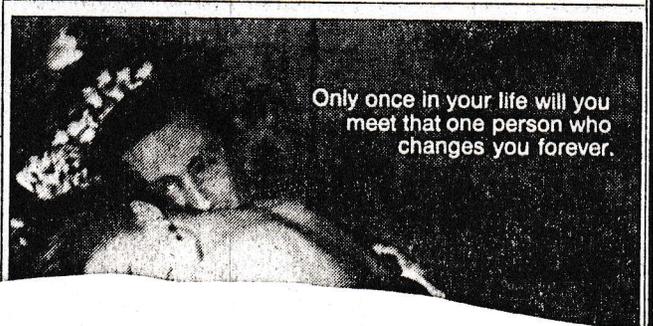
Episode five of Hungarian Miklos Jancso's nine-part "Faustus Faustus Faustus" is part of the "Public Television" section of the festival.

music by David Bowie and the late Jim Morrison.

In addition, Yugoslavian artists Sanja Ivekovic and Dalibor Martinis have produced "Chanoyu," an ironic and intelligent contemporary take-off of the revered Japanese tea ceremony. Other video art highlights include Belgian artist J.L. Nyst's "J'ai la Tete Qui Tourne," which melds exquisitely framed visual moments with a poetic text reminiscent of Antoine de St. Exupery. "Vault," by Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, is a tale of a romance between a lovely pole vaulter/cellist and a cowboy/ab-

stract artist that works both as a hilarious melodrama and a sophisticated attack on television manipulation.

Not surprisingly, the American video art is influenced by our commercially sponsored television. The work from Europe is more obscure, "artistic" and often tied to the traditions of *film noir*. A most fascinating exercise is the survey of Japanese video art by Fujiko Nakaya, which examines the ways the most ancient of cultures translates to the most technological of mediums. It is juxtaposed with a survey of Japanese TV commercials.



Only once in your life will you meet that one person who changes you forever.

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