

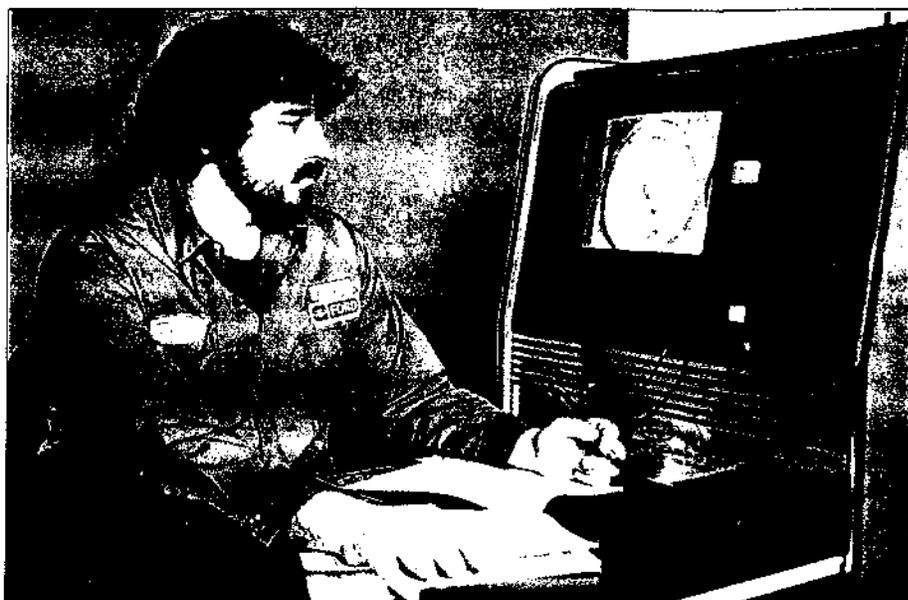
speaking course in which he watches and listens to himself on video playbacks. (The inevitable next step: the Fridge tapes a camcorder commercial showing him taping his teammates as they tape their ankles.)

As the video generation fast-forwards toward what conceivably could become an all-videoized culture, social analysts are only starting to address the fundamental conundrum: is all or even any of this *really good for us*? Whether they lean toward the Utopian or apocalyptic, most agree that we're witnessing what futurist Alvin Toffler calls the "demassification" of the media, a shift from broad distribution of a few images to all of us (e.g., via the networks) to narrow distribution of many images to select groups (via video). If such diversification has a downside, it is the erosion of that commonality of experience—that communal vision, if you will—that binds a heterogeneous society.

Academics, meanwhile, fret that today's undergrad, nurtured by video at home, school and play, has grown addicted to action at the expense of thought. Reports Michele Lamont, an assistant professor at the University of Texas-Austin: "Students are becoming more and more visual. In sociology classes, when they're asked to read something even a little bit complex, they get no pleasure out of it." Others fear that the formidable expense of plugging into the new video environment will further widen the educational breach between socioeconomic classes. "The poor," predicts University of Pennsylvania communications Prof. George Gerbner, "are going to be left out of it."

Hopeful futurists: Alvin Toffler, for one, opts for the bullish perspective. "We're reinventing the printing press," he declares. "[Video] makes for a greater variety of symbols and it encourages individualism. That doesn't mean a left-wing cult in Oregon will have a million viewers, but it will have a niche. The political impact of video appears to be limitless." John Naisbitt, the author of "Megatrends," sounds even more upbeat. "I don't see any [drawbacks to video]," he proclaims. "It's part of the unfolding of human experience. The chief benefits are access to information a lot of people wouldn't otherwise get. What we're doing is creating more and more options—more and more ways of doing things." At the same time, Naisbitt cautions that any prognostication risks being instantly outdated: "The technology is really exploding, with every step in fluency. I don't think any of us have any idea where it's all going to end up."

Perhaps not, but a close-in focus on where the video age is actually *at* can illuminate at least the outlines of its ever-widening horizons. The Screening of America in three acts:



JACQUES M. CHENET—NEWSWEEK

Hands-off training: A Ford mechanic practices servicing with an electronic "light pen"

Master Teacher

Initially, video arrived at the business office as part of elaborate multimedia presentations designed to train and motivate employees. "First you entertain them, then they'll learn," explains Herb Bass, cofounder of San Francisco's largest multimedia production firm. "It's like teaching the ABC's with Big Bird and the gang on 'Sesame Street' instead of repeating after the teacher." With Bird & Co. seeming a bit passé of late, the most revolutionary breakthrough promises to be the adaptation of computer and video technology to "interactive" training programs. Ford Motor Co., for instance, is testing an interactive system that will impart the latest information on car repair to its 40,000 far-flung auto mechanics. On the left side of a split screen, the system flashes an underhood shot of, say, a carburetor; on the right side, it presents an array of tools needed to service it. Using an electronic "light pen," the mechanic transfers the tools over to the other screen, connects them and begins making adjustments. (Look Ma, no grease.) All the while an audio track carries the appropriate sound of the engine running smoother or rougher. "This is like a flight simulator that gives hands-on training," says Tom Kubeshesky, a Ford planning supervisor. "It's amazing the way our technicians took to it. They love it."

More esoteric interactive experiments are under way in the Massachusetts Insti-

tute of Technology's "Athena Project." One of the most intriguing is designed to teach foreign tongues. For example, an aspiring linguist might learn French by watching a video in which a Parisian couple visits a real-estate brokerage in search of a suitable apartment. Playing the role of the broker, the student translates the couple's specifications and then, using detailed computerized listings and an electronic map of Paris, "interacts" with the couple by typing in recommendations in French on his keyboard. "Interactive video isn't a passive medium," says Janet Murray, the language project's director. "It requires a response."

Ultimately, the MIT researchers hope to apply computer-assisted video to the production of "electronic reference books" for students, but let's be sure to keep a wary watch on this one. By automatically recording how much time students actually spend hitting the "books," the computer can keep track of how diligent they are about their homework—an innovation that might have delighted Mister Chips if he hadn't read Mister Orwell. MIT research fellow Rus Gant predicts the system will be able to tell a professor, "This student comes in an hour a day or that one works 48 hours at a stretch and then disappears for two weeks." Nevertheless, Gant is convinced that the educational payoff will compensate for any unease about electronic surveillance. Interactive teaching courses sponsored by corporations and the Pentagon, he reports, have indicated that "students learn two to three times faster than with books and retain nearly triple as much information."

The utilization of tape as an instructional tool has even wound its way into the medical profession. At St. Joseph Hospital

THE VIDEO GENERATION

footage) provide a service by giving TV news directors stories they might otherwise be unable to cover. But the proliferation of what are, in essence, commercials disguised as news features has presented broadcast journalists with a troublesome ethical problem. When a reporter for a Los Angeles station ran a movie-studio-produced interview with actor Al Pacino, her superiors discovered that she had edited herself into the tape to make it appear that she, rather than a studio publicist, was asking Pacino the questions. The station subsequently refused to renew her contract.

All of which brings us to Wayne Fisher, a Houston personal-injury attorney who might be described as the Frank Capra of the legal profession. Fisher's specialty is the settlement brochure, which can include a taped presentation designed to persuade the other side to settle out of court. While Fisher is hardly the only claims lawyer to use video in such brochures, few invest as much care and ingenuity in their creation. With the help of \$500,000 worth of state-of-the-art video gear and two full-time technicians, Fisher turns out productions that could stimulate the tear ducts of Ivan Drago.

'I miss Daddy': Consider one of Fisher's "day in the life" videos, which vividly illustrate how a client's injury or death has affected his life or those of his relations. The 40-minute tape opens with the key fact: a man, the narrator somberly informs us, perished in a plane crash in a swampy area of Florida. Dozens of pictures from his family albums—old snapshots of the victim fishing or presiding over holiday dinners—



History lesson: MIT disc

weave in and out of on-camera reminiscences by his loved ones. His widow recalls their courtship. ("He wrote me poetry," she says. "He sent me a dozen roses every month the first year we were married.") Several of his colleagues at work laud his character ("He had a very special sensitive core that he was not frightened to let anyone see"). Then comes the heart of Fisher's case: the death's devastating impact on the victim's young daughter. As his wife testifies to his fatherly devotion, more snapshots fill the screen: the child playing on Christmas morning with the dollhouse he built her. Fighting back tears, the widow reports that her daughter tells her, "I miss my daddy... I miss his jokes." Cut to a drawing recently made by the child at school. It shows a house capped by a black rainbow and a boxlike car. "It's almost like a hearse," observes her teacher.

Fisher estimates that he has used settlement brochures to win half a dozen multimillion-dollar awards. To some in the judiciary, however, the emotionally manipulative content of such presentations may

constitute prejudicial evidence. As video emerges as a new legal tool, it has set off a complex debate over its applications. Today some prosecutors in sexual child-abuse cases spare the young victims from testifying in court by videotaping their descriptions of what happened for jurors to study. At the same time, child molesters have begun making tapes of their seductions and distributing them throughout the pedophilia underground. In other words, video, like any high-tech innovation, is, of itself, morally neutral. How we judge its usage as a new medium of persuasion hinges entirely on what the user is selling.

Personal Historian

Now for the fun stuff. As the camcorder, with its instant-playback gratifications, usurps the hegemony of the home movie camera, fashioning family video albums is burgeoning into something of a national pastime. Births, graduations, weddings, class plays, bar mitzvahs, that first haircut and that last will and testament—name it, and odds are there's an amateur documentary lurking about to capture it all through his viewfinder.

If your discretionary income is up to it, you can now turn the whole affair over to a professional videographer. They get some strange assignments. Last summer Butch

Fleischer, a videographer in Washington, D.C., was hired by the widow of an Army veteran to tape his military funeral at Arlington National Cemetery, complete with a seven-rifle salute. As the funeral procession moved through the grounds, recalls Fleischer, "I felt like '60 Minutes' following them with this camera on my shoulder." The notion of putting wills on videotape seems inspired more by the opportunity to endow families with a lasting visual memory of the deceased than by probate considerations. There's also the appeal of leaving behind a videotaped verbal message. A Southern California woman composed this whimsical poetic plea to her husband: "And please, when all my songs are sung / Don't fall for someone cute and young."

Taping marriage ceremonies is fast becoming the sine qua non for a classy nuptial (according to one estimate, 10 percent



HERMAN J. KOKOJAN—BLACK STAR

Directing the offense: Houston lawyer Fisher videotapes the injured party's testimony