NOVA TV SERIES: A REVIEW

A new television science series, NOVA, makes its debut on public television Sunday, March 3, at 7:30 p.m., EDT. Billed as "Science Adventures for Curious Grownups," a preview showing in Washington, sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science and WGBH-TV, Boston, which produced the series, presented the first two programs in the series. Both were well done visually and interspersed at some times with some magnificent, even breathtaking, film moments.

The first program, "The Making of the Natural History Film," was produced in Great Britain by the famous BBC Features Group, which has distinguished itself by a wide array of scientific and technological films. The emphasis was on the craft of cinematography more than science. There was a fascinating pictorial story of the ingenious and unnatural ways in which natural history films have to be made under artificial studio conditions. The viewer is presented with the enlarged look at the diminutive world of insect larvae, sticklebacks laying their eggs, developing embryos, and basic life functions at levels too small to see with the ordinary eye. How these views are accomplished by using macrophotography, which fills the screen with small creatures, microphotography, which substitutes the microscope for the naked eye, time-lapse photography, which speeds up movement that cannot be seen, high-speed cinematography, which slows down movement, and various optical techniques such as the dark field, was the chief subject of the film. It showed a veritable workshop of ingenuity where filmmakers can capture, as if in nature, routines like the courtship and laying of eggs of the stickleback and the wood wasp laying her eggs from the viewpoint of an observer inside the food. The film craft is excellent, and it has already won the Prix Italia and an International Emmy award. Taken for itself it is an interesting television show.

Examined in view of the objectives of the entire NOVA series, which is jointly funded by a grant from the Carnegie Corp. of New York, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Science Foundation, and the Polaroid Corp., in association with advice and cooperation of the AAAS, the first program raises at least one question.

A major objective of the series is to meet the public need for understanding science and technology and its consequences to man's current life and condition. This first program, while excellent as a film, may do little to answer that question. In fact, for the nonscientist and citizen, it could raise a big question as to how all this refinement of technology and dramatic film skill is actually related to the lives of people. Science is so compelling to those who participate in it and its expanding technology that it is easy to leave the viewer and the citizen out even when there is a fantastic attempt to bring him in through awe and mystery. This film didn't answer the issue of what it means to me.

The second in the series, scheduled to be presented March 10, "Where Did the Colorado Go?," is a much more exciting presentation for Americans. It tells a dramatic story of what 20th Century technology has done to the Colorado River. A skillful and sensitive production crew shows the story of the destruction of a river and its symptoms of decay, evaporation, erosion, vegetation transition, and decreasing quality of water. This is well worth the time of every television viewer who wants to have a better understanding of what his age has done to the natural world. WGBH-TV, which produced and collected the film series, has initiated for American viewers an additional thrust for science on television. One will hope that succeeding programs in the series reflect even more effectively that people are hungry for scientific information that is not just facts but that places in context what it means to human existence in the 20th Century. Titles of other special programs include, "An Exploration of Whales, Dolphins and Men," "The Search for Life on Mars," and "The Last of the Cuiva," an Indian tribe being gradually destroyed in Colombia. Subsequent programs will explore the discovery of anesthesia through a dramatic reenactment of this fundamental discovery in medicine; the story of the discovery of the Crab Nebula, one of the most powerful sources of radio and x-rays in the sky. Also slated for special programs are bird navigation and the fascinating technology scientists use to solve the question of how birds navigate; and not to be missed will be the film story of Washoe the chimpanzee who has been taught to communicate with humans by using the American sign language.

All with an interest in science should watch your T.V. schedules for NOVA.

—M. L. Sherburne