

A Video Artist Disputes Orwell's '984' Vision of TV



Nam June Paik's live international special is on public TV today at noon.

By GRACE GLUECK

In his cautionary novel "1984," George Orwell wasn't kind to television. He saw it basically as "Big Brother," a tool of the totalitarian state. But today — the very first day of that prophetic year — his view will be rousingly challenged, by the Korean born video artist and impresario, Nam June Paik. "Good Morning, Mr. Orwell," a live satellite-relayed program to appear on public television stations, including WNET/Channel 13, at 12 noon, is Mr. Paik's pitch for television as an instrument for international understanding, rather than an ominous means of thought control.

Mr. Paik's claim that his work is "the first global interactive use of the satellite among international artists" needs a little explaining. Other video artists, such as Doug Davis, have employed satellite transmission, but the Paik venture is larger and more complex. And while commercial television has linked different parts of the world for informational purposes, Mr. Paik is using works designed specifically for the technology of the satellite itself to create interactive performances, linking different stages in different parts of the world, so to speak.

"Good Morning, Mr. Orwell" is essentially a global variety show, originating in the United States, France and Germany, but its lineup of performing talent will be more familiar to Mr. Paik's "avant-garde" followers than to fans of network television. And while the program does not directly address Orwell's philosophy, Mr. Paik believes that in presenting established and new young talent from both sides of the Atlantic, it will "celebrate the positive side of the medium."

Among those who will appear, live or on tape, are the rock singers Laurie Anderson and Peter Gabriel belting out the title song (composed and recorded by them especially for the broadcast); on a split screen, the choreographer Merce Cunningham and the composer John Cage in New York improvising to Salvador Dali reciting a poem (on tape), beamed from Germany; the artist Joseph Beuys playing the piano, live from the Pompidou Center in Paris; the poets Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky singing one of their own compositions; a group of 80 French saxophone players and vocalists known as Urban Sax, and the irrepressible Charlotte Moorman, a cellist famed for playing Paik compositions dressed in almost nothing. (She'll be fully clad for her satellite debut.) Laughs — it is hoped — will be provided by interludes with the comedians Mitchell Kriegman and Leslie Fuller, both formerly of "Saturday Night Live." And viewers will also witness a world television premiere: "Act III," a film stretching the boundaries of electronic graphic display by Dean Winkler and John Sanborn with music by Philip Glass.

Now 51, Mr. Paik still looks, with rumpled clothes and tousled hair, very much the whiz kid who first came to the attention of the art world as a video innovator in the 1960's. "I never read Orwell's book — it's boring," he said recently during an interview at WNET. "But he was the first media communications prophet. Orwell portrayed television as a negative medium, useful to dictators for one-way communication. Of course, he was half-right. Television is still a repressive medium. It controls you in many ways. You tend to adapt your

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