

Mort Heilig's Feelie Machine

by Alan Riklin

Three-D as we see now will fail again," Mort Heilig was telling me, "for the same reason it did last time" — namely, that studios tend to invest in cheap, half-baked varieties that extract their quick profit before the public gets wise. This grieves Heilig, because nobody waits more expectantly for film technology to mature — indeed, to explode — than he does. In his 30 years as a "communications designer," Heilig has built a reputation as "brilliant but a little wild-eyed" for advocating what sounded like something out of *Brave New World* without Huxley's saving tongue-in-cheek. Simply put, Heilig wants to take technology to the limit: The Feelie. He's been working at it almost 20 years.

Armed with \$50,000 investment, Heilig unveiled his Sensorama Simulator way back in 1964. He hoped to show one viewer at a time what he swore he would provide in a full-scale theater: 3-D visual, sounds, smells, sensations, the complete illusion of reality. *The Saturday Evening Post* attended an early demonstration and proclaimed, "The Feelie is Here."

It might as well have added, "Go back about your business." For that is exactly what the nation and the movie industry did. The six-foot-tall, 30-inch-wide contraption was shipped to the Santa Monica Pier, where it played as a curiosity to the peep-show set, until Heilig, having tired of servicing it himself, removed it.

The Feelie is in the back yard.

Heilig, 55, is talk-show articulate. He seems to relish many of his words like brandy on a tender tooth. "Science has enormously expanded our consciousness," he told me, "but the movie art form of today simply isn't adequate to express what the filmmaker wants to say."

Heilig readied the Simulator, which looked slightly weathered, eerie in the moonlight, more like a relic from an H.G. Wells tale than one from Huxley. Through something like binoculars I would look directly upon the double-image film itself. Beneath the glasses was some sort of grille-mask for my nose and mouth. Breezes and chemical smells and vibrations would be governed by electronic circuits in sync with the visual image. There were small speakers to embrace my ears. I leaned into the booth-like opening and waited, grasping the handlebars before me.

I rode a dune buggy. Then a motorcycle. Then a helicopter. And then I went on a "Date with Sabina."

I ride in an open convertible alongside Sabina, a blonde flower-child in a cableknit sweater who keeps smiling like I've just said the wittiest thing.

"Ri-ding with Sa-bi-na," sings some campy combo to a Watusi beat.

Soon we're on tenspeeds, Sabina's hair taking a spirited ride on the wind. I feel the wind. We play tag on the beach, and Sabina smiles that clear-faced smile. I'm

grinning like an idiot.

"Sa-bi-na," sings the alert combo.

Sabina lures me through a grove, bending back twigs that I'd swear I could touch. She reclines on the ground and beckons. I approach, but I sense vaguely that something is wrong.

Mort Heilig gently pries my fingers from the handlebars. When I left the Simulator, it struck me how quiet the night was. I had truly been elsewhere.

Heilig pointed out that such total involvement of the spectator is what makes 3-D so potentially powerful. Elsewhere is an idyllic place. "Eventually," he said, "we could do a computer analysis to

generally plays God with temperatures, winds, and elements. Aromas waft in from the armrests, then are sucked into a vacuum behind the headrest. Heilig has even gone so far as to allow for private exit routes from each unit to the lobby. And he is certain that this hand-and-foot harem assault on the senses will enhance, rather than encumber, a film's intended message.

To him, it's all quite a logical nth degree. "When sound came to film, creators were so enamored of it that the characters never shut up and aesthetics regressed 20 years." But as one becomes secure with this technology, Heilig asserts, an appropriate "content-ology" can emerge. "*Jonathan Livingston Seagull*," he suggested, "should have



Michael Arena

reproduce you on the screen. You would literally see yourself up there with Sophia Loren."

The showcase for such an interlude, if Heilig has his way, will be his all-or-nothing marvel-house of the future, the Experience Theater. Its elaborate blueprint anticipates every detail: seats that are individually perched stadium-style to witness total peripheral 3-D from a screen that stretches 170 degrees horizontally and 155 vertically. Directional sound flows from all sides, above and below. Each spectator straps into a seat whose housing swivels, tilts, and

been done in Experience Theater."

The Experience Theater is protected, rather needlessly, by U.S. patents No. 3469037 and No. 3628829. "I'm not a drunk," Mort Heilig said, laying the patents atop the plans on his coffee table. "I'm an honest guy. And I can't do it. Can't get financed. It's not true what they say about building a better mousetrap."

Typical was the response he'd received from Ub Iwerks, a Disney executive back when Walt was "very much alive." Heilig says Iwerks posed two key questions: Is

your invention truly revolutionary, and can you prove there is widespread support for it? Heilig pondered momentarily the semantic paradox, wondering how he could satisfy one of the questions without defaulting on the other.

Some 20 years later when Heilig was hired by the Disney people as an effects consultant, he erroneously presumed they wanted him to carry out his dream. Heilig was allowed to produce some 3-D effects for Disneyland, but he was growing more shrill and impatient about his long-neglected masterplan. He wrote one memo bemoaning their plan for the adult theme park EPCOT, which Heilig saw as a tragically bungled opportunity to elevate the human spirit. "Someone had to say that the emperor wasn't wearing any clothes." Shortly after, Heilig put out a memo warning that the script for *Black Hole* was doomed to fail. He rewrote the script in one afternoon, correcting some of its more glaring implausibilities. The company made it clear that they were not interested in any more memos about the emperor's wardrobe, and Heilig was gone.

"When people tell me the movie business is dead, I have no pity for these jerks," Heilig said, as documents stacked on his coffee table like a thousand unheeded memos. "Only Walt Disney understood that he was in the experience business rather than the celluloid business."

To the coffee table comes Heilig's self-published manifesto, *Blueprint for a New Hollywood*, which proposes, among other things, an industry-wide superfund for research and development. "We know this invention has got to come," he raged, "so for the price of one feature film, why not build the damn thing? We could lead the world, or we could spend the money on landing gear for one bomber."

Heilig savored that irony. "I hate to say it, but if I could promise that my theater would murder its audience, the government would jump right in."

Heilig's most recent ray of hope was the emergence under new tax laws of small venture-capital companies. He wrote ten formal proposals. For ease of bookkeeping, he received ten speedy rejections.

"So what will you do?" I wanted to know.

Pause. "Commit suicide," he smiled. "It'll make a hell of a premiere. I'll do it in Experience Theater."

Listen to Heilig, fairly awed by his logic. The symmetry of his schema is awesome. Consciousness has three phases, says Heilig: Observation. Integration. Action. Mankind expresses these in (surprise) three forms: Science. Art. Industry. Science has its methodology down pat, he argues. Industry's close behind. It's flaky old art that's resisting progress. Art whose role, according to a 1955 article by Heilig, is to digest phenomena "into the deeper realms of feeling, generating emotions of beauty and love that will guide the crude energies of mankind to constructive actions . . . Without active participation of the spectator, there can be no transfer of consciousness, no art. Thus, Art is never 'too' realistic."

Heilig's universe is gorgeous and orderly — in general, not the kind of place where God shoots dice. So what's Heilig to think? Having summed it all up for us on a blackboard, he sees us shift in our seats, sees no glint of recognition from our venture capitalists, sees all of us dressing up for the future with the wrong fashions and the wrong rayguns . . . ■