

LONDON VIDEO

Long Beach/Colin Gardner

The Pleasure of the Text is the title of a book on semiotics by Roland Barthes, but it could also aptly describe the selection of new tapes from London Video Arts, recently presented at the Long Beach Museum of Art's Pal Video series. Representing the younger, "second generation" of British video artists, the LVA tapes are typical of the current trend in independent filmmaking in Europe, which finds its fundamental concerns in narrative, text *qua* text and the post-war European semiological/structuralist movement exemplified by the work of Barthes, Christian Metz and Umberto Eco.

London Video Arts is an artist-run, nonprofit organization which has been distributing and exhibiting artists' video since 1976. The Pal Video program featured ten short works selected by Jeremy Welsh, each highly individual yet all sharing common structural concerns. Each in some way presented a narrative of sorts, usually related in real time with a static camera and either telling a conventional story or at least developing a linear progression of information. The language of the text is broken down, image and sound are juxtaposed and counterpointed, and the resulting fragmentation allows the audience to creep inside each narrative, to decode it and to redevelop cultural assumptions on how image and sound can and should relate to each other.

None of this is particularly new. The pioneering work of *Screen* magazine in London, the independent films of Malcolm Le Grice, Laura Mulvey and Peter

Wollen (*Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*) have already laid important groundwork for structuralist cinema. The LVA appears to be carrying on this tradition with tape, though it was noticeable that not one of the featured tapes was exclusively concerned with video. Many of the statements could quite as easily have been made on film—the point here seems to be one of overall filmic language rather than an exploration of the plastic qualities of tape compared to film.

There was an inevitable variation in quality among the tapes, a few having the appearance of sophomore studies on a particular structural premise, much like a video term paper. Other more adventurous theses showed remarkable and entertaining insights into narrative codes and ideological conditioning. Marion Urch's *An Introduction to Womanhood in the Modern World*, for example, was both ironic, humorous and densely multilayered. A static camera showed a pair of hands decorating a birthday cake in the form of a woman's face. The icing (makeup?) was applied as the soundtrack featured a party atmosphere (Chuck Berry's "Sweet Little Sixteen"). Candles were inserted into the cake/face and lit, the lights went down and "Happy Birthday" was sung. The candles were blown out, the lights went up and the candles were removed. With cynical understatement yet visceral impact, the face was then cut into slices which were separated one by one from the body of the cake, as if in a human vivisection. The final shot was of a slice being consumed—an obscene gesture of



Catherine Elwes, still from "Kensington Gore," color videotape, at the Long Beach Museum of Art.

cannibalism and exploitation, yet superficially quite acceptable.

Equally effective in its use of simple visual language alongside a startling sound/image dialectic was John Scarlett-Davis's *Non Stop Cut Up*, a video equivalent of William S. Burroughs's fold-in/cut-up writing style—a nervously fragmented paean to the eroto-violent gay subculture. Through rapid cutting, repetition, a garbled soundtrack and subtle use of close-up, Davis created a highly sensual, often painful collage of violence—blood squirting from a vein as someone shoots up, a noose, an orgasmic gasp, smoothly abstracted skin texture, a kiss, etc.

Steve Hawley's *The Undistributed Middle and Other Fallacies in the Home* dealt directly with language and its syntax, grammar and meaning. An apartment is hardly the normal setting for an examination of English grammar, but a fallacy is the ideal structural underpinning for a dissection of fallacy. The verbal and the visual "metacommunicate" each other, the two sets of

narrative codes at once reinforcing and counterpointing.

Margaret Warwick and Catherine Elwes both presented a narrative that was more formally literary, but whereas Warwick's *Still Lives* seemed highly formalized, Elwes's *Kensington Gore* developed several planes of reality through sound narrative even as the visuals remained highly theatrical. As a special-effects artist became obsessed with the artificial violence of a location shoot, we saw in close-up the head of one of the extras being made up, his throat slashed and the fake blood (*Kensington Gore*) splashed liberally along the scar. The realism of the makeup, the artifice of its application, the seeming reality of the story being narrated and the obvious fiction of the video itself made for a profound examination of textural encoding. Mercifully however, and this was also true for most of the other tapes, the artist's sense of humor considerably lightened what could have been dryly academic. The text as pleasure principle, perhaps? □