Prisoners

Great Britain, 1984
Director: Terry Flaxton

Dist—London Video Arts. *p.c*—Triplevision. *sc/ph*—Terry Flaxton. In colour. *ed*—Terry Flaxton. *sd*—Anthony Cooper. 16 mins. (Umatic).

Live from Airstrip One.

Late in 1983, Apple Computers commissioned Ridley Scott, fresh from his futuristic dystopia *Blade Runner*, to make an exceptionally lavish television commercial. This was to launch their new, and subsequently successful, Macintosh, but despite a budget of $800,000, the commercial was intended to be seen on screen only once—during the 1984 Superbowl. Taking 1984, together with George Orwell's *1984*, as its theme, it portrays a defiant attack on the totalitarian régime of Orwell's world. An attractive, athletic young woman is pursued by police into the midst of an Orwellian hate session. Moments before her capture, she pitches a huge hammer into the air and sees it crack against the television image of Big Brother. Once the Macintosh has arrived, the advertisement exhorts, "You'll see why 1984 won't be like *1984*".

Motivated by corporate pride, Apple also commissioned *The Making of 1984*, a short videotape which cuts images of the elaborate shoot to a 1930s-style rendering of "Puttin' on the Ritz". Shots of a brain washed mass and of their guardians, in the shape of helmeted policemen, are snappily assembled as an up-beat promotional tape which takes the form of a polished music video. Terry Flaxton incorporates both the original commercial and the tape about its making (on which he worked as a cameraman) into *Prisoners*, together with the above contextual information. In themselves, these elements are powerful and disturbing, but by juxtaposing other material he initiates an oblique yet exceptionally provocative interrogation of the meanings on offer in these complex and, in a way, uncontrollable images.

The most potent of the additional elements is what appears to be a covertly filmed discussion with a group of skinheads, who have been made up as members of the mass. Their casual, threatening racism is chilling in itself—here is an image of British society in the 1980s which is in some senses as frightening as Orwell's vision. But their understandings of identity, of camaraderie and of what they call patriotism, also resonate with the ideas about authority and rebellion, crowd and individual, which are powerfully exploited in the commercial.

Developed in parallel to, and intimately bound up with, this political discourse is the tape's investigation of written and televisual languages. The materiality, the physical quality of the paper on which Winston Smith writes in *1984*, is contrasted with the immaterial nature of television images, and with their fundamental illusion. Truth and lies are at the heart of Orwell's morality and politics. But, the tape asks, what real meaning can these ideas have in the simulated world of the film studio and in the perhaps equally simulated world of 1984 itself? Despite some rather unconvincing image-processing, and a superfluous final caption, *Prisoners* is an engrossing engagement with this fundamental question.

JOHN WYVER

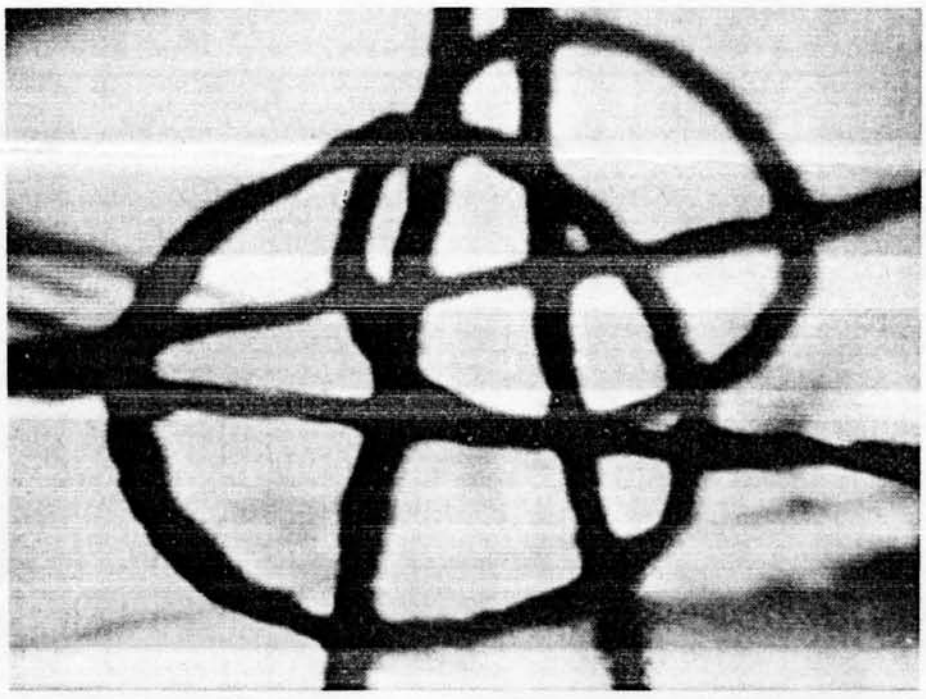
TV Fighter (Cam Era Plane)

Great Britain, 1977
Director: David Hall

Dist—London Video Arts. *p.c/p/ph/ed/sd*—David Hall. 10 mins. Umatic.

TV Fighter is undoubtedly one of the few classics of British video art (Hall's *This Is a Television Receiver* is another). Not only does it merge the two distinct directions of the 1970s video art movement—an exploration of the properties of video as a mechanical mode of representation, and a confrontation with the illusionism of broadcast television—but it has a simplicity, economy and energy as rare then as it is today. Hall takes the point-of-view shot in its most dramatic and visceral form, by using archive war footage of a fighter plane strafing a railway train and a ship at sea. The camera is obviously strapped to the plane. We are transported, visually and aurally, with the unseen 'pilot' as the unseen 'plane' swoops down, the tracer bullets marking out the burst of gunfire. Then, after the explosion of a hit, the plane pulls out of its dive to reveal the horizon sinking in the screen. These shots are repeated and edited in slightly different ways throughout the tape.

First, we see the footage as we would in a television documentary, quite normally. Then we see a screen on which the same sequence is being played as Hall's camera shoots (the identification of camera with gun



Beyond the limits of language.

is suggested throughout) a monitor showing the footage. An immediate and common illusion (but a perfectly illogical one) is that this image shows the monitor at the moment we are watching it. We might expect to see the backs of our own heads in the foreground of this second viewing 'area'. There is also an implied difference between kinds of 'time', which in this case is more complex and only partly illusory: that is, between the historical time of the war footage—shot in the past of some 'real' and dangerous situation (it could, of course, be a cleverly done feature-film mock-up of a war scenario)—and the time of the shooting of the monitor, which is akin to time present.

Hall then proceeds to deepen the conceptual aspects of the piece. A hand appears on the screen and begins to paint a gun sight on the monitor showing the fighter footage. The hand is not very steady and the contrast of texture, line and composition between the images on the screen and the ill-applied paint is a further difference inserted in the tape. The hand also draws in (literally and metaphorically) the notion of an off-screen space, and it complicates the space between the viewer's screen and the visible screen. Hall at this point moves the camera to mimic the fighter plane approaching its target; the sound from the monitor in shot now becomes attached (a further illusion) to the moving camera and not the aeroplane represented on the monitor. As the sound of the aeroplane engine rises and the staccato of gunfire is heard, the camera swoops in on the monitor.

A further illusion is one concerning movement; the monitor gives the appearance of moving, although we can infer from our knowledge of the medium that this effect is achieved through the movement of the camera itself. This movement is different from that portrayed in the fighter-plane footage, because the latter represents a total space while Hall's studio footage is of an object in a darkened area with no obvious spatial reference points. The screen goes blank. We are then presented with the image of a monitor, with gun sights, showing on its screen a moving monitor with gun sights over the image of the fighter-plane sequence. And finally, the camera moves so that it swoops and dives on the monitor showing the swooping and diving monitor. The means of linguistic description reach their limits here, mainly due to the problem of distinguishing between camera movement and its effect of making the objects shown seem to move.

When the camera moves and films another monitor showing an image attained by a similar camera movement (if it is not the same one), then in order to describe this we are forced into extreme contortions of language, a sign that Hall's tape is irreducible in its aural and visual effects. An astonishing *tour de force*, *TV Fighter* has a confidence and élan which makes it highly watchable, even if one is not quite sure of the conceptual implications. Interestingly, when Mark Wilcox, a young video-maker, included *TV Fighter* in a touring programme in 1985, he described the tape in more emotional and moral terms: "The spectator is pinned down in the hot seat, vicariously experiencing the excitement of speed and danger and also aware of the destruction in which s/he is implicated—just by looking". Such an interpretation is less concerned with the conceptual aspects of the tape, but thereby perhaps reveals its richness, its capacity to be understood in a variety of ways.

MICHAEL O'PRAY

With Child

Great Britain, 1984
Director: Catherine Elwes

Dist—London Video Arts. *p.c*—Catherine Elwes. With financial assistance from the Arts Council of Great Britain. *p*—Catherine Elwes. *post-p*—North East London Polytechnic. *sc/ph*—Catherine Elwes. In colour. *camera op*—John Muellbauer. *ed*—Catherine Elwes. *m. extract*—Symphony No. 1 in D Major by Gustav Mahler. *sd*—Catherine Elwes. 17 mins. (VHS/Umatic).

The inception of video brought with it, before the growth of technical gadgetry, a unique opportunity for artists to explore the domestic, the objects of everyday life, without the large-scale effects and inevitable abstraction of film. For this reason, landscape is difficult to include in video, as the domestic is in film. Video reduces and flattens, deflating any grandiosity, while film magnifies and overwhelms with its scale.

Catherine Elwes' tape successfully portrays such an aspect of daily life—pregnancy—but does it, with much wit, through a series of dreams or fantasies. These are moments in the tape when the woman (Elwes herself), shown in a tight distorting close-up on her bespectacled eyes, either daydreams or slips into sleep. Toys, her own and ones acquired in anticipation of the birth, are animated using stop-motion techniques to express her anxieties, anticipated pleasures and, more interestingly, murderous desires. Her later tape, *There Is a Myth*, depicting the child at the breast, also invokes Kleinian notions of the power of aggressive feelings projected on to the infant.

With Child is a highly controlled and precisely paced tape which manages to express a whole set of feelings, thoughts and desires: the nostalgia for the mother's own childhood through old toys and their simple mechanisms (clocks, music box, battered piano); the embodying of the future in the animated infant's clothes; fears of the doll/child as attacker, as threat, with flashing lights turning the doll into an uncanny object. Throughout, love and desire and the sexual act which initiated the pregnancy are represented by two cheeky soft-toy monkeys, who make love in a scene of wicked humour mixed with tenderness. The conjunction of a monkey's tail and the accidental fall of the sheets mimics wittily the penis' movement in the vagina.

Elwes' camera pans across rooms, now and then showing the outside world of trees, rain, a back garden and hanging washing. Sound is used imaginatively to suggest the observing, mother waiting, the domestic and the imagined world—wind, rain, a stifled cry, heart beats, a piano and a segment of classical music to accompany the copulating monkeys. When the toys take on a life of their own, they anticipate the individuality of the infant, as a consciousness over which control and responsibility (desired and feared) is at first necessary but also lost. In the last sequence, the naked mother dresses a doll, as if it were an infant, while at the same time phrases related to childhood and motherhood appear on screen in French with their English translation.

With Child is about the patient preparation for an expected child, in both a physical (clothes replaced on shelves) and mental way. Its refusal of sentimentality does not exclude a range of other feelings—nostalgia, love, humour, fear, anxiety and aggression. Throughout, it expresses a keen visual intelligence, a wit and realism born of working through fantasies not often acknowledged in women's visual work on the phenomenon of birth.

MICHAEL O'PRAY

Playing a waiting game