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VIDEO

Benjamin Woolley has been watching the work of a new breed of image-maker.

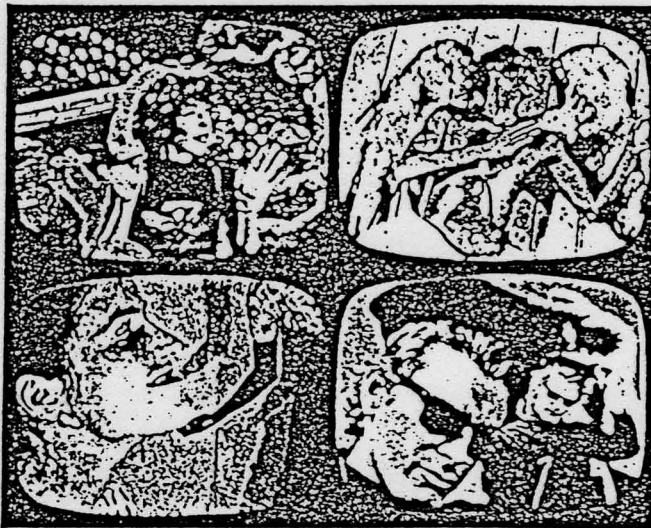
Scratching a living

There's more to television than broadcasting. This is clear from the forthcoming Channel 4 series *Video* (Monday 11pm-12.05am Channel 4). There's a sub-culture fast developing, pushed on by the domestic video market. A number of people who would not normally get access to television production, and certainly not broadcast television, are using the latest miracles of modern video technology to get their own views and visions on screen. Thanks to the cheapness of video cameras and the now widespread availability of video recorders, the broadcasting industry is losing its monopoly of image-making. People have grabbed the chance to do their own thing.

Being able to 'do your own thing' has the sound of the Sixties for good reason. It was then that film-makers exploited cheap and portable 16mm and even 8mm cine-cameras to explore new ways of creating images. Since, it was argued, the film industry's idea of experimental cinema was paying Alan Bates to take his clothes off, why not bypass the 'usual channels' and produce risky work unmediated by cigar-smoking cinema producers? The same applies to video, except there's strong evidence that video is helping to create a far more powerful and popular medium for independent image-making.

Channel 4's series, and a concurrent season of showings and talks at London's ICA Cinematheque and Café Gallery, appropriately entitled Channel 5, will reveal the extent of the growing body of video work emerging from the independent sector. The work to be shown displays completely new and distinct forms of television, ranging from 'art', a sort of dynamic painting, to 'scratch' video.

Scratch video is rightly arousing the most interest. It establishes a radical new approach to television itself. It abandons the idea that TV images are mere representations of what's 'real'. It starts to disassemble the images themselves by indulging in orgies of



An assortment of images taken from Channel 4's 'Video'

editing. The results can be gripping. The most provocative and invigorating work comes from groups of video makers like the Duvet Brothers and Gorilla Tapes, both of whom are prominent in the second of the three Channel 4 programmes. Gorilla Tapes' four-part *Death Valley Days* (of which two parts feature in the series) includes a deft re-editing job on Reagan speeches, which turns him into a savage critic of his own policies. Peter Savage's *Tory Stories* reduces a Thatcher interview (including the pre-interview nice-and-cosy chat with the interviewer—always very revealing) into a series of vapid Thatcherisms.

In a sense, scratch video is the epitome of what professional broadcasters would call irresponsible television. It knows nothing of the normal ethic of balanced and accurate reporting. It is almost innocently careless with its material, and this is its value. However, it's clearly a weakness as well; if only because it can hardly avoid biting the hand that feeds it. Most of the material for scratch video has to come from broadcasting companies, particularly news and current affairs producers. Since scratch is essentially a critical response to traditional broadcasting practices, it is always running the risk of upsetting its major supplier. On top of that, broadcasting a video that contains the work of a number of different copyright holders creates a huge administrative problem. One reluctant contributor could foul up the whole show.

The first and third of the *Video* programmes deal with the more experimental 'art' work that forms a major part of the corpus of independent video. The first programme includes a useful introduction to the video world, supplied by journalists Sean Cubitt and Andy Lipman. As Cubitt points out at the beginning, anyone who records the programme is breaking the law, the result of one of those strange legalities that beset the private recording and reproduction of copyrighted work. Interesting to speculate that the great law-breaking public stretches beyond trade unionists and civil servants to embrace virtually all video users and, dare one suggest, a Cabinet Minister or two.

Art video is mostly concerned with shaking up traditional images created by broadcast television. Nearly all of them involve subjecting 'normal' images to all sorts of electronic and photographic distortions, and mixing them with music. They represent the way music videos could have developed before they became pop promos and thus the preserve of encraving consumerism. The art of independent video-makers pushes well beyond the limits of mainstream fashion makers like Godley and Creme. Some of it generates quite stunning images, notably in *IOD* by Jeremy Welsh and *Tilt* by George Barber. However, video-makers can sometimes be rather indulgently arty; sitting soberly in front of a screen full of people waving candles in front of

another screen to the sound of variations on airport bing-bong noises (Steve Hawley's *The Extent of 3 Bells*) can be difficult. But then, it at least generates a reaction.

One of the central themes of the series is viewer response. To illustrate this, the second programme features an interview with the viewer; a clever idea, but naturally impracticable, except as a means of showing how easy it is for an interviewer to put words into the mouth of the interviewee. Television is, of course, one way and can't be any other way. The idea of viewer participation is more an expression of the desire among independent video makers to make television watching more active; they want to change it from a sort of cultural intravenous drip into something we have to decide about; accept, reject, applaud, condemn. This it has succeeded in doing by giving committed groups access to the screen, not just artists but organisations like local authorities. The GLC Police Committee Support Unit has funded videos on policing London that show how television can participate in, rather than just passively 'report', politics.