

The Return

Terry Flaxton revisits the roots of video making, and, with VHS-C in hand, plans to recover the images and sounds of the natural world.

THIS ARTICLE HAS two beginnings. After having written what follows, I decided to get back and clarify its points. Somehow, somehow, the coming together of money and power to effect patronage on artistic production genuinely destroys its *raison d'être*, its qualities, the art itself. I was looking at the four or five slots available for new writing on TV (FOURPLAY, THEATRE-NIGHT, etc) and saw that the product was mediocre, unchallenging. Why was this? It must be something to do with the selection process; I refuse the possibility that somewhere in Britain there are no good new tv writers.

I recently glimpsed a script that will soon go into production; I could tell instantly from the dialogue, lack of rigour in the structure, and ineptitude of the original conception, that this is going to be a piece of uninspiring work. This should be embarrassing to its funders when they see the finished product and kick themselves for not being able to detect just how misplaced the ideas are. How did this get through? Something inherent in the hierarchy perhaps: secretary, script-reader, assistant commissioning editor, etc, has mitigated against the coming to the fore of exciting creative work. Of course, there's the old boy's network, the fact that most script-readers come from theatre, the dependence on the written word for its authentication by TV and so on, but even then, something good should come out of the process; but it rarely does. Why?

The same follows for innovative and experimental video. The hierarchies, the interchangeable but rarely moving apparatchicks, the goodwill destroyed by the process, and the same mediocre

productions. Why? Is it the grey skies, the length of the winter, the inbuilt cynicism and the accompanying and inferior emulation of great European film makers (yes, I love Tarkovsky and needed to make an homage of my own). Why won't those in apparent power take the big risks, the gambles that can trust greatness on them if they succeed and acclaim for having courage if they fail? What's going on? Well, having set that up, I actually have no real answers and no fast solutions. Thank god I am getting over deep cynicism and resentment, but I'm genuinely perplexed about our work. It's strange that when attending European festivals, British video is highly acclaimed, more so than most other countries work, yet those same artists are ignored in Britain. Perhaps this island is a pressure cooker, a place where we feast upon adversity, where to fail is to succeed, and where to be successful is to become the moving target.

Everywhere I look, I see amazing images. Not the constructed and seductive imagery of promos, commercials, features, or post-scratch art school five-finger exercises, but rather the images of the natural world (The Natural World). The worlds before film, the world before painting. The imminent world, the perceptions that exist before-thought. Before the definition, natural.

I went to art school after seven years at grammar school. I'd previously learnt a lot of facts and how not to relax, how to achieve in areas that propagate cancer and ulcers, how to win the approval of the great and the good, how to be caned after discussing the literary tastes of the inflictors of pain, how not to cry. In the upper sixth I'd created a week with 32 out of 45 periods in the Art room. I loved it: Art. Then a supply teacher arrived and told me that my work was of a form of masturbation. His motto must have been: 'Be kind to the young'.

Art school was no Bohemian paradise. I'd gone there to get expelled. One of my rock heroes had done that, and I thought that was the height of coolness. Then they really tried to expel me. I didn't like that. They had the power. Politics had entered my life forcefully. I learnt about fear, a grim foreboding of what I was to learn later. I flunked the next stage through purposefully knowing nothing about art history, then I spent five years as a professional musician. In other words, I was broke. But I had fun, sometimes we played through the night, nobody was going to tell us what notes to play.

I went back to college; the advert for the course read: DO YOU WANT TO LEARN HOW TO DO

Birmingham Film & Video Workshop's OUT OF ORDER (1989): Camera: T. Flaxton.



VIDEO? I didn't even know what it was - but I was hooked. So I went and spent three years getting a degree in Communications Design. There were many episodes, including the whole student assembly nearly going to court against the college and the CNA, but there's no space here to tell the stories. Then the trouble really started.

I left college and went to America, got to San Francisco, and within a week had made a segment of a programme with my two partners (we called ourselves VIDA, which meant 'look at this', from the Latin *Videre*, which we thought meant 'to see'; anybody remember Latin out there?). This went down the West Coast and about ten million people saw it. Success. We came back to Britain and hit the brick wall at about a hundred miles an hour. Britain didn't want us. Who did we think we were anyway?

Previously at college we'd done a lot of work on the ideas surrounding documentary. We knew that documentary is a form of fiction; that at best the tape or programme documents the attitude of the makers to their subject, at the moment of making. We knew that fiction was also a kind of documentary: as a document of attitudes, perhaps it's more honest.

And we'd also made some art pieces. We all had trouble calling ourselves by the label 'Artist'. It seemed like an honour that other people should give you, like the term 'Director'. Obviously the term can be self-applied, but there is a quality about some directors that transcends the more prosaic creative foreman approach. We'd become involved in an early incarnation of LVA and curated a few dozen shows. Questions began to arise from our collective working practice, and from the cross-fertilization of the different genres we were working in.

We kept making tapes, now with bigger and better budgets. Most of it was commissioned documentary. Trade Union, Local Government and Campaign work. But we tried to infuse a creative solution to their requirements - after all, we all had a degree in Communication Design. Years later, I showed some of my work at a screening; one critic, who for the sake of my potential career shall remain nameless, said that the work was ordinary, old hat. So, five years after a tape has been made, with a good deal of original thinking and innovative devices at the time, and after much emulation by other independents and then mainstream tv, it becomes 'old hat'. There is a clue here to why video is an extraordinarily difficult medium with which to create art.

We changed our name to Triple Vision. We felt that we wanted to keep our cross-genre reputation, but lose the dominant art based feel. Channel 4 came along. We went to the consultancy meetings and made a noise about video. We even learnt to use fashionable words like 'underpin' and 'cross-fertilization', but I guess we came across as British football fans abroad. They guessed that we didn't really believe the creed. A few years later we started to make a series on video, about video art. We made five programmes in all. It was like one of those Olympic dives, where the diver causes no ripples (that's what we tell ourselves anyway). Naturally, it did well abroad.

We went on to make a few programmes. All the time I'd worked as a freelance Lighting Cameraman. By working in the Industry, I'd found that there wasn't a conspiracy, just the dull grinding of the wheels of the giant machinery of apathy and ignorance.

But the thing is, I love art and culture, or, more precisely, making it. I've learnt a lot over the last thirteen years working in and around the medium; except perhaps, how to unveil it. How to reveal it. How to free that art from my own neuroses and preconceptions. How to get in touch with the perceptions that exist before thought. Before the definition, video.

I planned to berate the system, but it's pointless (I suppose I have a bit, but who can resist throwing stones at old windows). An



Uptown Top-decking: Triplevision's THEN THERE WAS ONE

artist (a real one) who I had been working with told me about success in the art market. He just made me realise that it is part of the West's fetish with commodities. I knew this anyway, at least intellectually, but not with the profound: "Oh yes," and then the relaxing relief that there's nothing you can do about it anyway. As he himself said: "Whether the work is any good or not is irrelevant. Of course it helps if the work is good, but it's more about the moment: the fashion, the dealer's whims, what's happening internationally, and whether or not the work can be put in front of the right person, by the right person at the right time. You just have to be family."

I'm not afraid anymore, there's no more foreboding. You don't have to have the system ratifying your work for it to be good and worthwhile. Why is it that you can get an award for a tape, have it screened all over Europe, and not feel successful? Why does it *matter* that you get no response from your own country. Especially when you realise what a backwater the place is?

I still want to make art video (besides other things), but the funders are growing cold on the subject. One of the worst problems is to have to propose a project in written form. It means your innovative and experimental ideas are modified by a medium fundamentally different to the finished medium. There's also an exponential growth in the relationship of compromise to budget, of drifting off course and the winds of discourse coming from the funder; of the relationship between patron and patronised.

Moral: Big budgets cause big problems; Institutions cause pain.

I'm going to hire a VHS-C camera and make a real-time art piece (anybody remember the genius of Dieter Frose). High technology still needs a lot of work on its effects on meaning: it's no good yelling 'acid' and smearing yourself and the audience in colours and shapes and expecting understanding (other than for fun value of course); or alternatively, like a soothsayer in a Greek tragedy bemoaning the coming of the death of meaning (like some of the nonsense issuing forth from the Left Bank of Paris)

The only luxury that I'm going to allow myself is this tape of mine is a small device which has been used before. This will be an attempt to go back to the very beginning of the analysis of the procession, or, as some would have it, the collision of sound and image in the present tense, which is video. I will displace the real soundtrack by a few seconds from the image, in an attempt to recover the images and sounds of the natural world. The world before film and video, the world before painting. The imminent world, the perceptions that exist before thought. Before the definition, success.