

INNOVATIVE PROGRAMMES NEED INNOVATIVE PRODUCERS



Bar a few magnets, one wonders what happened to the lodestone of experiment that our new TV was meant to deliver.

One remembers that at the inception of Channel 4 there was considerable discussion of its role vis a vis the encouragement of new or innovative work. The original lobbying to this effect even resulted in the insertion of a special clause in the channel's charter to the effect that it should encourage work "innovative in form and content"; certain slots, Eleventh Hour, for instance, were set apart to deal with this particular brief. There is a similar clause in the BFI Production Board's "Guidelines to Applicants" which effectively cancels itself out when it also suggests that this work should be accessible to the widest possible audience, obviously a contradiction in terms. Innovation in the field of creativity is rarely recognised at first and to support it usually takes a certain kind of courage.

Anyway the clause is probably there as a bureaucratic compromise, a sop dreamt up by a committee to fob off criticism of its inevitably reactionary production values. One has only to look at the BFI's MOR record or to check out the presentation of its equally boring co-respondent, the London Film Festival, to get an idea of the extent of its failure to innovate. Wonderful as the '26 version of *Ben Hur* may be, it is symptomatic that it should be advertised as a high point of an '87 festival. Where, one wonders, are the '87 high points of '87? Probably buried in the Pirelli Mausoleum in the V&A. Among certain Buddhist sects special lamas are considered to reincarnate in order to unearth the old texts which have been lying hidden awaiting their moment of revelation, and Brownlow is perhaps the cinematographic equivalent of one of these, but innovator, I think not. Technocrat perhaps, and even archaeologist, but as far as I can remember his form and content have always proved remarkably and boringly predictable.

David Larcher, avant-garde hero and video poet, looks at the state of television art and considers who to behead

... a little grouse and sour grapes ... (someone said)

a word processing ramble in lieu of a treatment, meaning basically give them their heads ... and especially me.

TV ... Timeshare ... and in the etymological sense of produce-re ... pro: forward, ducere: to lead .. to.. an introduction to the proper introduction of an A B C H D non narrative TV etc.....

**Innovative programmes
need innovative production.**

Certainly there should be a place for this sort of work, but not to the budgetary exclusion of the new. What I am trying to address is this theoretical potential for innovation and experiment that the BFI and C4 are so pointedly failing to find or subsidise. I suppose one can sympathise with the poor blighters; where, one may ask, is this innovative work to be found and anyway if and when it ever is, it is immediately assimilated into the commercial sector. In the end film and TV get what they deserve, commercial producers and critics bent on marketing practise ... the Attenboroughs and Barry Normans of this world, that's the sort of ethic we get offered on tele; last night at least ... and in fact, as I write this, here comes Mr Norman in the afternoon, being chatted up by the TV barrow boy, Des Lynam, treating us to a further dose of insipid anecdotes and oft repeated clips ... *Gregory's Girl*, *Citizen Kane*, Shakespeare, cricket, the early TV interlude of the potter's wheel; everyman's placebo he didn't really know he wanted. It's a particular brand of bland media-ocrity which I must agree is fine for those of us who follow the soaps, but can have precious little relevance to anything except the 'I pat your back and you pat mine' syndrome. I wonder do they both have fan clubs like Anneka Rice? Or a lobby to guarantee the repeat of the repeat of the latest mini-series etc. It would explain their ubiquity. Worst of all, a new generation of clones has arisen, similar in every respect except style; the prevalent alternative to their cozy chatside manner is represented by the latter-day quick talk down hype of the pop shows.

Anyway, I have a sneaky suspicion that all that may be about to change and it'll be due to the advent of the all embracing high tech. Producers are going to have to think more creatively, not in the accounting sense, but in the sense of what they end up foisting on the unsuspecting(?) public. There will come about a new type of production based on something like columnists or correspondents. A sort of Beuys Wogan with the fluency of the Waughs of this world. (pace Velikovsky & Wells). People will turn on to see what so and so has to say this week or this month. Not in the sense of a Wogan talking head personality but in the sense of "latest work" of ... Just as Caxton, Guttenberg etc redefined the way that we interpreted or communicated our experience, so the development of

the PC and associated hardware, framestores, AD/DA devices, chip cameras etc are going to completely alter TV and film production. It's going to get a lot cheaper. Broadcast spec will be within reach of the most humble of us. At this particular juncture we are witnessing the analogue medium of film pricing itself out of existence, whilst the electronic and digital systems haven't yet become quite cheap or effective enough. When they do the TV channels will become more like newspapers and magazines. The freelance video freaks will be producing their own material more or less from home. The channels will no longer be able to perpetrate their standard fare quite so easily since there will be a much greater opportunity to exercise choice. Nor will they be able to guarantee the traditional captive audience. Naturally this is going to alter production practise and those who are in it basically for the money will end up where they properly belong, in property development or advertising. Given this redeployment of the presently all pervasive incentive towards profit, a genuine place for innovation will at least get the chance to emerge in the new structure.

Up until now, the problem has been one of the economics of production. There have been virtually no one-man bands in the system with the result that a lot of the work tended to be produced by a sort of committee process. Whilst in France they at least have the concept of the "cin-easte", or basically someone who does more or less everything him or herself, from concept to neg-cutting to soundtrack, a sort of Renaissance Film-maker; in GB the existing regime doesn't even have a word for such an individual in its vocabulary. There is an establishment which supports the division of labour. This is not to say that such people do not exist, but there have been various problems with their commissioning; timescales, unionisation, credibility, etc. Most of them have ended up teaching in art schools and scraping around for grants to subsidise their work. Quite soon however with the advent of a new generation of PC's and associated video hardware, broadcast spec graphics and editing configurations will be within the means of most interested parties. Just as it is now possible to produce top hits on a 16 track Fostex from the home, so a similar situation will come about for those involved in the visual. In fact the two will become insepa-

rable and a new profession will come of age, the "Teleasete".

For the moment what is needed to initiate this is some sort of commissioning structure that does away with the compromise of safe programming. Film/video makers should not have to describe the content of what they are paid to produce any more than a columnist in a newspaper is asked ahead of time what he intends to write about, or a painter is told what to put in or on his canvas. Rather they should be given a slot to fill with material of their own choosing ... ie. Here's an average budget, give us something next year that we can broadcast. The stranglehold of the commissioning editors over content should be limited to the people they choose rather than extend to the artificial and unadventurous procedures, usually economic, that end up

The work of the producer should be more akin to that of the curator who fills a space rather than determines its content

with the creation of series that in themselves become marketing exercises. It brings to mind Angela Rippon describing how they make 5 quiz shows over the weekend based on an idea by Michael Grade who having checked the first pilot then asks for 46 please. This may simplify their production lives but ends up accelerating the process of entropy that appears to be gnawing at the TV body corporate. Look where Mr Grade is now. And seeing his Uncle Lew with Frost the next day on TV am bodes ill when considered in terms of the repetition compulsion. In effect, the work of the producer should be more akin to that of the curator who fills a space rather than determines its content. Those currently controlling commissions, i.e. what we get to see on tele, could do well to take a reflexive look at the criticism levelled at the government's most recent injunction. For political, substitute Kulte gestapo ... which fleas on whose back? We can count ourselves lucky that we at least have the Open University. Naturally this represents a rather disturbing proposition for those currently controlling the means of production. As the person next to me says as a result of reading this off the screen, "Basically, David, you are telling them something that they are terrified of hearing

Arts Section

... all these producers who wish they were film-makers." ... or perhaps think they are. Or even more to the point, are in fact marketeers.

The problem also arises whether people are actually interested in watching "Art" or "Poetry" as expressed in electronic media. Are they interested in watching non narrative processes? Obviously not if they don't get given the chance, which as yet they can hardly be said to have had. The film/TV poet is virtually unrepresented except under the auspices of umbrella series such as "Ghost in the Machine". (Incidentally there were 800 applications for the 10 pilots financed by the new series which is clear indication that there is a growing number of people with aspirations to TV who produce this kind of work).

Although there may be an increasing number of people who privately struggle to cultivate the poetic faculty few have so far been allowed near the air waves. There are not many producers willing to take real risks and the result is the resultatory safe fare we are all too familiar with. Given the fact that these people already exist alongside the more

conventional grades of director, camera, editor, etc, how can it become possible to find them a slot of some kind of voice within the framework of television. The answer of course is to get hold of some and give them their head. Perhaps even get hold of several under the auspices of a sort of group. Night Thoughts for those who can't dream rather than a Night Network for out of work groupies or marathon nonentity chats. Presumably this was the idea behind the initial C4 workshop experiment, but most of the production appears to have ended up mainstream. One got the feeling that a lot was the result of worries over renewed contracts. At the BBC there was a mini attempt at a technology grouping with the series of painters working with a Paintbox but it was disappointing; mainly to do with the use of name painters who almost exclusively regurgitated their favorite formulas with the help of a technician(?) expert. Well, now, perhaps instead of seeing Hockney paint by numbers, let's hope that it is time to see the work produced by those genuinely working with the medium. Not necessarily through the procedures of high tech, but work coming through any of the multitude of

potential techniques that can go into the making of television. Not so much to do with the mannerisms of technology but more with the expression of a personal vision. Not an ENG crew going out to tape somebody discussing their experiences or a studio talk between experts on metaphysics or the impressionists, but a genuine stab at a voice embedded in the medium itself.

Obviously it's difficult to know who can be trusted to bring back something at the end of the day, and someone has to be convinced that that person knows how to use a camera, or computer, or rostrum camera, or multiplexer, or paint system or all or several of them. But credibility aside, they should be left to themselves. Until they are, the unknown quantity trapped within the raw material of TV, video, is never going to get out.

Let's hope the talking heads are soon disembodied or perhaps even beheaded. The bit poets have yet to bite their cake, but when they do, there will be no shortage of producers(?) wanting to share in the eating.

David Larcher

DIRECTIONS

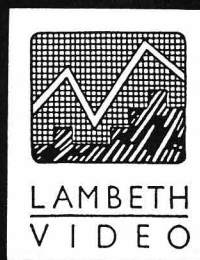
Your thrice yearly guide to short courses in film and video across the country. Issues cover April-July, August-November, December-March.

£1.50 an issue, plus 30p p&p

Send a cheque for £1.80 for the latest issue to:

**BFI Publications,
21 Stephen Street,
London W1P 1PL**

To be included in future issues, send information about courses and articles on training to Dinah Caine at the address above. The next deadline is the end of May.



LAMBETH VIDEO
one of London's
longest established
video workshops

- * offers regular professional video production **TRAINING** courses and specialist workshops
- * undertakes video **PRODUCTION** work of all kinds for organisations, groups and individuals
- * provides **EQUIPMENT** and crews available for hire at very competitive rates. Concessions for work of public benefit

For more information please contact **LAMBETH VIDEO**, Unit F7, 245a Coldharbour Lane, London SW9 8RR. Telephone: 01 737 5903

A provisionally enfranchised AC11 workshop, funded by the London Borough of Lambeth and Greater London Arts