

SCRATCHING DEEPER

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Scratch video made a strong impression last year. It provoked the video art community and enchanted the media. Video art seemed on the verge of coming in out of the cold, but not so; all that seems to have happened is that once again the commercial world has ripped off the arts. I don't think the scratch artists will be too worried about that as it was always part of the game they were playing. Only an idealist could have believed that it would have been otherwise. Nevertheless, scratch should not be judged solely by this relationship, for it also related quite strongly to the art video scene itself where its detractors were legion, some of whom, at least, felt it necessary or opportune to think again about their own practice and the general state of video art in this country.

What was surprising perhaps is that video art was there for the taking by the scratch contingent – it didn't seem to displace an ongoing centre of energy but rather filled a void in what seemed a fragmented and rather tired area. It should also be borne in mind that a new art form, movement or whatever often seems

to reek of bad taste at first, shocks by its preposterousness. And scratch video seemed to have that going for it although unfortunately it is not a sufficient condition. A veteran German avant-garde filmmaker suggested recently that the difference in approach and style between the artists of the 60s and 70s and those of the 80s was drugs – the slow, static camera work of the marijuana haze supplanted by the nervous quick cutting of cocaine. The humour of the remark does not negate the sliver of truth it contains, and in the case of scratch it is its strength that it does reflect the times – it is the definitive video form of the mid-80s. Whilst that is no guarantee of excellence, it does arouse interest. Besides, the scratch work was not all hype and flashy surfaces, it did encapsulate neatly the contradiction at the heart of video between the isolation of art practice and the desire to capture its wayward doppelgänger – broadcast television. If scratch was about to resolve that contradiction, for some the price was too high.

George Barber's new compilation *Scratch Video Volume 2* had the problem of following the astonishingly successful earlier volume which together with the *Death Valley Days* tape by Gorilla Tapes, became probably the most widely seen independent video (excluding the Miners Tapes) last year. Even scratch video supporters must have been nervous with some of the hype it received particularly after last year's reception at the Edinburgh Television Festival. But this new compilation with work by the Duvet Brothers, Girolla Tapes, Goldbacher and Flitcroft

and George Barber himself dispels many of the doubts and fears. The standard is very high and consolidates the two directions or tendencies always embedded in scratch – that of the political and social satire or agit-prop trait and the more 'deconstructive' and imagistic one.

It is no surprise that the distinction between these two tendencies is never quite held in practice. For example, Gorilla Tapes' *Sante Fe Trail* as well as being an attack on Reagan and his policies is also a deconstruction of a Hollywood film both as ideological vehicle and as encapsulating the 'Reagan' persona. Nineteenth-century US cavalry officers look off-shot at a US bomber taking off – Kuleshov montage lives! Gorilla Tapes' skill at delivering the goods without any slack has

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rightly made their work one of scratch's success stories. Their new tape *Till Death to Apartheid* again constructs a political theme in terms of common ideological stances represented by the media itself. Alf Garnett 'watches' Pik Botha on TV and by cleverly editing his remarks, turns the Garnett phenomenon on its head, whilst at the same time linking, perhaps crudely, British fascist tendencies with South African apartheid. The criticism heard in some quarters that the humour drowns the 'message' seems wrong-headed. Humour has always been an important weapon of political debate and struggle. We have only to remember Marx's 'belly-laugh' and Brecht's use of humour. Moreover, for too long the Left in this country has been too readily identified with 'seriousness' or what turns out to be a boring intellectualism, as foreign to its potential supporters as much so-called progressive art.

The Duvet Brothers have the problem of following their classic scratch tape *Blue Monday*, and their *Virgin* is broadly successful as agit-prop, but their best piece, also in the compilation, is *Chat Show*, particularly the Player's Cigarette montage edited together so as to mimic the frantic moments of cinema – a close-up of a bottle of Champagne being opened, a tear being delicately wiped away at a concert, a ride on the Big Dipper and the exhalations of smoke from those ubiquitous cigarettes in 1950s' British films. Their other tape *Laughing Girls* is a one idea joke using old footage of girls laughing (an acting school?) reworked through sound manipulation and image repetition. It is reminiscent of the found-footage films of the Canadian film-maker David Rimmer, e.g. *The Dance*. Sandra Goldbacher and Kim Flitcroft's tape seemed a throwaway piece merging images from TV adverts, feature films and a Joy Division soundtrack but without the focus of their earlier work.

The highlights of the tape for this reviewer were George Barber's own tapes *Yes Frank, No Smoke* and *Absence of Satan*. Barber's role in scratch has been two fold, as its most active promoter – his Volume One being one of the most widely seen tapes last year and the most representative of what scratch was (or was not) – and as one of the most interesting of the artists involved. The promoter role has often overshadowed his work which has always had a quite distinctive 'art-video' feel, although his use of scratch music tracks at times made him seem the only 'true' scratch artist. In these two new tapes Barber reveals a fine control in editing and sound interaction plus a density of ideas and textures which must place him at the



forefront of the deconstruction end of scratch, and perhaps of video art itself as practised in this country. In conversation Barber has mentioned the influence of Stephen Heath, a leading film theorist associated in particular with the semiotic stance of the film magazine *Screen* in the 1970s. The crucial essay is Heath's 'Narrative Space' where he explores the construction of filmic space through its traditional devices (the 180 degree rule, eyeline matches and shot reverse shot). Heath's interest is in the paradox of the illusion of spatial and temporal unity acquired in film through the fragmentation of the image, citing Oshima, Michael Snow and at times, Hitchcock as the horizons of such devices and illusionism in the cinema. Barber is very much working within the framework of these ideas but at the same time not allowing the work to become simply a codicil to a theory.

In *Absence of Satan* Barber has intercut moments from two films – *Absence of Malice* and *The Brotherhood of Satan* – to make literally another film. Employing fragments of dialogue, a dense rhythmic music track and the repeat-edit technique, plus the tracing of off-shot looks through disparate films, he has produced a tape with the density and weight of film, but one which is the 'other' of the classic Hollywood narrative film. *Absence of Satan* is a haunting study in female paranoia and male menace that edits together superficially meaningless sequences and moments from two films to produce something which represents the meaning implicit, at least, in many narrative films – the

women as witness of horror (often only 'seen' off-shot by characters) as the carrier of certain emotions – anxiety, fear and displacement. Thus, a jumble of images from different narratives becomes coherent in their new form and emotional shape. The tracing of looks, the casual phrase, innocent gesture, in other words, all the elements which lend visual and narrative density to a story told in images and which usually escape our attention are reworked by Barber with insight and skill. In Barber's other tape *Yes Frank, No Smoke*, the theme is female panic, the strictures of maleness set against a form of innocence that Barber's cannibalising of two Hollywood films (*The Deep* and *The Blue Lagoon*), allows him to develop. Barber's characteristic interest in images of water, fish and plantation is important here in building rich associations and giving the piece a fluidity always under threat. *Yes Frank, No Smoke* is less a pseudo-narrative, instead it stresses the more formal aspects of framing, creating different areas of movement within the screen particularly in the underwater sequences. Barber plays here with some of the more dubious images of narrative film but manages to transform their connotations with wit and skill, whilst retaining enough of the original context (the rather awful film *The Blue Lagoon*) to create tension for the viewer.

The Scratch Volume 2 compilation tape suggests that scratch is around for a little while longer at least, and the hope that it would lead to new and serious areas for video artists seems to have been fulfilled.