

Ned's tale is designed to appeal to the organs of feeling as well as to the mind and conscience and, with Martin Sheen forcefully yet sensitively at the head of David Hayman's capable cast, it undeniably succeeds in doing so. If this is agitprop, it is agitprop with a human face; if it's a dramatic debate, it's a debate with a heart. □

## VIDEO

### Screen play

John Wyver

*Freed from the sterile techno-nursery, video art is celebrating an exuberant coming of age*

UNTIL RECENTLY video art suffered from the prejudice that it was dull, ineptly produced, over-long, more boring than *Crossroads* and consequently of interest only to other video makers. Although this myth drew sustenance from a residual trace of truth, it is now a judgment that demands to be challenged and overturned. And the current exhibition, *Scanners*, at the AIR Gallery is as convincing a presentation as any of video as an exciting, entertaining and stimulating medium.

In a history of just 15 or so years, video has explored a remarkably diverse range of concerns. At first those intrigued by the new medium often concentrated on its technical peculiarities and potential. Soon it was recognised that the fledgling art would have to negotiate a relationship with the overwhelmingly dominant forms and ideas of broadcast television. Many video makers have exploited their medium's oppositional possibilities and produced social-action and agitational tapes. Like last year's extraordinarily successful *The Miners Tapes*, these are often made for particular audiences and linked to specific campaigns and have been used with great effectiveness.

Other tape makers have opted to live, in however uneasy a partnership, with television. This has especially been so in the United States, where video has in any case received far greater support from museums, art galleries and even certain elements of cable and public broadcasting television. Artists have consistently parodied television, they have 'borrowed' and re-used its pictures and they have investigated its relationship with society's power structures. Above all, they have sought to create alternatives to the restricted range of images which constitute an evening's output from the small screen.

In the past four or five years television has started to exploit mercilessly these new images. The explosion of music promos has meant that many of video's tentative experiments have been gobbled up in the relentless chase after new 'styles'. Adverts have similarly plundered video's new vocabulary, as in Rowan Atkinson's current commercial for Sony's Trinitron television. In

30 seconds this runs through a catalogue of sophisticated visual tricks and jokes about the medium, all of which have clear precedents in video art. Last year the breakthrough development in video was *Scratch*, which is the rapid re-cutting of television sequences to reveal new meanings. This year *Scratch* is flavour of the month for the opening titles of television shows like *Saturday Live* and Channel 4's forthcoming series about television, *Open the Box*.

Despite these interchanges, video has remained largely invisible to a general audience. In London only the ICA and the distribution organisation London Video Arts mounted regular screenings, which were too often sparsely attended. And this experience was frequently echoed in the handful of other interested venues around the country. Television, too, did little to recognise its debts to the medium.

Channel 4, however, has begun to change that. Video maker Anna Ridley was commissioned to make new videos with painter and diarist Ian Breakwell and with other artists for her series *Dadarama*. The unconventional arts magazine *Alter Image* (soon to return for a new series) incorporated and commissioned some highly imaginative videos. Last September three *Eleventh Hour* programmes, 'video 1, 2 and 3', presented some of the most interesting British video together with interviews and contextual comments. And at the beginning of this year the series *Ghosts in the Machine* showcased international work.

Video art's profile is consequently now higher than ever before and the *Scanners* exhibition, co-ordinated by London Video Arts, is well timed to take advantage of this. Anyone looking for a crash introduction to the medium will certainly find it in the mix of installations, screenings, discussions and even workshops on offer, and in the resourceful catalogue which, with Arts Council support, has been produced on a VHS cassette.

This catalogue, which runs for an hour and costs £13.99, is one of the best features of the show. The production values are not those of broadcast television, but the mix of interviews, extracts and information is sharply paced and thoroughly appropriate for the exhibition.

Another imaginative innovation is the 'Window Box', a grid of nine screens which face onto the street and on which short silent tapes are played to catch the attention of — and, it is hoped, to delight — the passer-by. Inside the gallery, alongside three installations which use video in quite different ways, a programme of newly-commissioned short 'postcards' is constantly on display, as is a selection of recent video from Japan.

Certain of the pieces, like Mineo Aayamaguchi's nine-screen installation, celebrate the purely aesthetic qualities of video. Others interrogate broadcast television, although few in as literal a manner as Kevin Atherton's hilarious if occasionally heavy-handed 'interview' with an episode of *Coronation Street*. Many of the best tapes use humour and irony, like the postcard 'See You Before You See This' which sketches with an electronic pen the tensions and evasions of a family holiday.

Perhaps disappointingly, too few of the pieces on show bring new images to any real engagement with hard-edged political realities, although Mike Stubbs's postcard 'Greetings from the Cape of Good Hope' is a telling comment on South Africa. But what the show demonstrates overall is that, although video is a young medium, it is already mature. It needs no apologies, nor should it be too much longer before the prejudices against it are no more than memories. □

*Scanners is at the AIR Gallery, 6-8 Rosebery Avenue, London EC1 4TD, until 13 April. Ring 278 7751 for details of additional screenings and lunchtime discussions.*

## PHOTOGRAPHY

### Look at us

Halla Beloff

#### Britons: 50 Group Portraits

NEAL SLAVIN *National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford, to 29 June*

PHOTOGRAPHERS HAVE always been attracted to Doomsday Book work. The camera seems ideally suited to produce a survey of people in their ordinary contexts, while studying a whole swathe of them does have its own fascination. The pictures are bound to have a documentary quality — the people are real or they couldn't have been photographed — and it's fun to see who's been worthy of choice, who's been left behind, how they came out. Neal Slavin is the latest to present us to ourselves, under the formidable title *Britons*.

In 1979 another American, Arnold Newman, photographed a cross section of well known London people and called it (even more formidably) *The Great British*. His subjects were experienced in media performance, accepted on their own terms, and had the gloss of their fame to see them through what you and I might experience as the ordeal of being photographed. In attempting to provide a complement of 'common people', Neal Slavin might have had difficulty in getting such smooth presentations.

As it was, Slavin had two advantages. As in his earlier collection in the USA, he sought out groups of people who were used to coming together for collective enterprises. That way, they could face the camera justified by a group social identity; they could find strength in a crowd. And he used a 20 x 24 inch Polaroid camera, which is not just a technical matter. On the one hand it gave instant feedback for the rehearsal of poses for an ideal show, while, on the other, the very awkwardness of the monster machine removed the snatching power of the photographer and evened up the work that both parties had to do. In fact the camera had to be transported round the UK in a van and needed a team of technicians to service it as well as to lug it about. One can imagine the reward when one of those big, one-