

Not Necessarily:

New Works for Television
BBC 2, July – September

In the 90's, there is more proximity than polarity between video art and broadcast TV – such programmes as *Dadarama*, *Ghosts in the Machine*, *White Noise*, and others, which, although few and far between, have nevertheless made colourful inroads into the televisual flow and critical inroads into its homogenous output.

Scotland has never been a media orientated visual culture, despite the much known David Hall precedent at Scottish Television in the 70's, inspiring the '19:4:90' series of 'Television Interventions' which occurred in Glasgow in 1990. More recently, BBC Scotland has transmitted a new series of 'video art' pieces under the programme title of **Not Necessarily** and broadcast nationally in the UK on BBC 2. Commissioned by the BBC and in conjunction with DJCA in Dundee (produced by Ken McGregor and Steve Partridge), the programmes were broadcast between July and September 1991.

The eight programmes of 10 minutes duration contained four new 'live action' commissions, and several pieces from ex-students in the post-graduate department at DJCA. The works ranged from the exploratory to the demonstrative, realising some memorable pieces in animation, fiction, semi-documentary and computer graphics – yet more grist to the mill for DJCA as one of the UK's pioneering college facilities. It might be misleading, therefore, to call this video art.

I watched all programmes (except one) on a preview video copy, ironically enough, channel zapping for the hell of it when I was suitably distracted and cutting back into the normal sequencing of broadcast. On this occasion – a Saturday afternoon – the deluge consisted of childrens programmes and adverts, the most noted of which was *Danger Mouse in Gaelic*: surprise is always a pleasure even if born in ignorance of the language.

This was not, then, ideal circumstances for watching **Not Necessarily**, one presumes that the short bites that it is slotted into is all important, the work being considered in this context, in the flow of television. Whilst this might be a justifiable argument, TV is not so unpredictable that you couldn't imagine and know the context already, but the possibilities of time-specific associations is of course denied. Thanks to technology, TV is video and can be seized from the clutches of the broadcast moment.

The ability to appeal or cut across age shone through in several of the pieces: in **Lei Cox's** *Three Unanswered Questions*, in **Doug Aubrey's** *Blood Tied and Colour Blind*, **Stephen Kemp's** *Station Master at the Edge of Time*, and in **Lorna Simpson's** *Nothing But Reflection*. It is less interesting in the computer renderings of mutoid animals and humans that allude to commercial application. There were exceptions to this as far as

computer imagery was concerned: **Mark Urwin's** *EndGame* and *Night at the Joli*, and **David Cox's** *Time Piece*.

Blood Tied and Colour Blind by **Doug Aubrey**, one of the four commissions, is a celebration of the Old Firm football teams (Rangers and Celtic) and is a humorous and fast piece which attempts a kind of 'Roy of the Rovers' approach in its structure: the framing and sequencing are constructed and intended to flow like a comic book. The video follows two football supporters from their opposite ends of the city, using the iconography of the urban cityscape and takes them through their respective areas of allegiance: the Celtic supporter through Parkhead and Barrowfield, the Rangers supporter through Govan and Ibrox. The lighthearted appeal of the piece, which could be described as a piece of documentary comedy narrated by a character called Archie Amphetamine played by Scots comic **Bruce Morton** – underlies a more serious intent. As the graffiti on the walls state – 'No More Bigotry' and 'Home Rule' suggests a unification of supposed opposites, an image conjured up again by one of the closing shots of the fans' scarves tied together to form a St. Andrews Cross.

Judith Goddard's commission, *A Bluish Green* presented a postcard piece of Glasgow with all the predictable ingredients; alternative tourist videos that suggest that prior visits and more careful consideration might have resulted in a piece with something more to say. With precise framing and dissolves, the visuals comprise of shopping malls, Kibble Palace, a fossil grove, the Clyde River, the city at night, the Botanic Gardens, all of which suggest a rather arbitrary use of imagery, which is retrieved by the soundtrack which uses read news items concerning infantile morality, Japanese investment in the city, a gunman's suicide, a drugs court case, and domestic stress. This obviously hinted at an undercurrent of violence behind the glossy image perhaps, but the unrelatedness of the imagery and the sound did leave one wondering about a lack of coherence. Only one image in the piece suggested a 'theme' of ecology: oilskinned men in the Botanic Gardens shot in slow motion, which has a slightly unnerving quality about it and is undermined by the closing shot in the piece which further validates the suspicion of the makers distanced viewpoint of the city: an ariel shot of the Botanic Gardens taken from the roof of the BBC Scotland building.

Lei Cox's *Three Unanswered Questions*, and **Kate Meynell's** *As She Opened Her Eyes*, were less successful works in this context. In the former, the fallibility of common-sense beliefs is dealt with in a studio shot piece which left me wondering if I should be looking for some underlying motivation beyond the perfection of the production values. At first frustrating, the best the work aspires to is delightful diletantism, rather than being thought-provoking or – for me – funny. This was disappointing for a strong image-maker like Cox, who also composed the title soundtrack for the series. Where Cox's piece lacked depth, **Kate Meynell's** *As She Opened Her Eyes* was oblique enough to suggest that there was something going on which this male viewer (in this case it

is probably not incidental to note the gender) couldn't quite decipher. The piece used an elaborate set, shot in a large majestic hall, and peopled by three women, the protagonist being a ballet dancer, one plays a recorder, whilst the third gives symbols to the dancer throughout the piece. These were the clues to the piece, which contained no narrative, but did use what seemed like cumbersome titling, such as, *How can I give him nightmares when he's forgotten how to dream?*: enough to evoke complicity and curiosity, but for me, no conclusion.

Dealing with a very personal experience in a much more hard-hitting format was **Louise Forshaw's** *Eleven Years*. The issue is rape, the narrative is direct and unpretentious, the images being close-up tracks on a woman's body which avoids exploitation of the issue in hand.

Other works were outstanding: **Stephen Kemp's** *Station Master at the Edge of Time*: beautifully shot and edited dealing with the aforementioned locked into the past and living in a present devoid of human interaction. Again, the piece works on many levels – appealing to both adult and the young alike, provoking enough for a video art audience, and accessible enough for a non-specialist public. The same can be applied to **Charles Wilson's** *The Kirk The Sea and the Red Fish*, a moving and poetic work set, presumably, in some Highland coastal hamlet. A story of betrayed love which ends in a fisherman's death after rejection from a woman, and although sounding a trite cliché, the piece uses the available technology to deal with traditional Celtic themes, the story being based on a story by George Mackay Brown. By using the images to tell the story, with careful dissolves, overlays, and sound, it at

once conforms and transcends orthodox notions of Scottish 'filmmaking', in its theme, location, and influence.

This is all the more interesting in the context of TV – some of the pieces in **Not Necessarily** were more appropriate than others by being broadcast into your home, rather than received within the space of an art gallery (which has its benefits too). This worked particularly well with Aubrey's, Kemp's, Wilson's, but also in John Butler's *Leisure Society* and **Alison Leaf's** untitled piece. TV's fetishization of its own technologies and of corporate culture's consumer advertising is dealt with through parody in Butler's Amiga computer generated mini-classic, and implied critique in Leaf's barrage of Paintbox images of corporate logos. Several points of observation arise in these pieces concerning the englobing power of TV and the media as the microcosm of power and control in society – they are sharp pieces but not overbearing.

Two short works shone through as epitomising the qualities of continuum and fragmentation of video. **Stephen Kemp's** *The Dead and the Dying* uses a shot of a man sitting at a baywindow. With the passing clouds and the use of dissolves to record slightly different positions of the man in the chair, duration is implied. In *The Breakdown*, what might be the same man sits in the chair which rotates and multiplies into the infinity of that 'hyperspace' of the TV screen, that void between the production moment to its flickering presence in the atomised space of the living room. Such 'indeterminate' qualities are what theoretically and aesthetically retrieve **Not Necessarily** from limited effect. *Malcolm Dickson*

