

EDUCATION SECTION

SHEFFIELD MEDIA SHOW

(FLICKERING) PROJECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Spring is traditionally the time when art schools shake off their winter torpor and launch themselves into festivals. Traditionally also, no-one running these festivals is ever able to find one word which covers the field of video, film, performance, photography, and sound. Thus we have festivals of performance, time-based work, expanded media, time and motion (quite clever this) and so on. The best used to be Coventry's Events Week, which in the late seventies provided a focus for the burgeoning fields of performance (especially) and video, which were then just rising to establishment status in art schools. Alas nebulous cuts, policy changes, and personnel moves nullified the Events Week a couple of years ago. Meanwhile, the Expanded Media Show at Sheffield had sprung into existence and built up a healthy reputation. After a hiccup last year when the original instigator Roger Bush moved to Hull, the festival was revived at the end of March this year by myself and an enthusiastic group of students. Only the 'expanded' part of the title was lost, expansion being now regarded as a property last attached to the mid-seventies. (A pedant might have pointed out that painting and sculpture are also media in the true sense of the word. This however is not solely a problem for festival organisers, as 'Independent Media' must have often debated amongst themselves.)

Not before time. The news that Maidstone College of Arts is to close its time-based Fine Art area is a significant event in the rise and currently preventable fall of Fine Art Media education. It was at Maidstone that David Hall, formerly a sculptor and later pioneer video artist, began in the early seventies one of the first video and sound departments in the country. Its influence was wide. An early graduate and video artist, Steve Partridge, later ran the Fine Art media area at

Coventry, and currently heads the M.A. course at Dundee. Others have profoundly influenced the artistic and musical culture of the late seventies and eighties. And this demise comes ironically as the area of time-based work in Art Schools could now be celebrating around twenty years of achievement in film, video, performance, sound, and photography.

It was in 1967 that the liberal studies department at Sheffield obtained a clockwork Bolex and Barry Callaghan encouraged the first tentative student productions. The Communications Arts area of Fine Art survives at Sheffield, and is one of the largest and strongest in the country, but the number of others is dwindling. Portsmouth recently closed its area, to be reborn as a design oriented course. Newcastle has opened a course in Media Production, and the Fine Art course has lost its media component. Other colleges are being forced to examine seriously the option of removing time-based work from Fine Art and switching it to design, simply in order to survive. There is no denying the usefulness of the new courses but hardly as an alternative to Fine Art. Nor is it suggested that these changes come from a deep seated desire of artists and teachers to suddenly switch to design and industry oriented film and video courses. These changes are a pragmatic response to the government's policy of implementing large cuts in arts courses, including Fine Art, whilst preserving design funding.

But what of the work produced and shown during the festival week. Did it fulfill the hopes of those fighting for the besieged time-based areas? Well, the answer was a qualified yes. A mixed programme of invited artists and students showed around sixty hours' worth of time-based work (plus photography) during the week. John Adams, Catherine Elwes and Mark Wilcox showed videotapes; Jayne Parker, Anna

Thew and Tony Hill film; and Marty St. James and Anne Wilson and Dogs in Honey presented performances. There was student work from St. Martins, Brighton, Hull, Cardiff (lots), Newcastle, N.E.L.P., Wolverhampton, Preston, Glasgow, Maidstone, and of course Sheffield.

Highlights of the week? Well, by common consent they had to be: Calum Colvin's mind bending photographs - collage gone mad all over paint spattered armchairs and stuck on ephemera; Louise Maunder's (Cardiff) performance in the corridor inside an immense roll of sheets of newspaper; Sarah Kennedy's (Newcastle) pungent and hilarious animated films of the everyday sexual and social lives of northern women (all played by herself); Tony White's (Sheffield) understated and ingenuous performance with a plaster star and a harmonium, which struck chords in those able to remember Russ Conway's smile; and Tony Hill's warm and magical film projections in the Mappin Art Gallery, which in themselves seemed to justify the reinsertion of the word 'expanded' in the title of the show.

In general, the student video work could often be disappointing, with strong exceptions. The student film work less so. Too often a tape wandered, ambled almost, past the threshold of interest, whereas financial constraints presumably prevented the filmmakers from following the same path. There was a refreshing exhilaration evident in some tapes which exploited, revelled, in the opportunities which new technology has offered to the videomaker, whilst still holding on to strong ideas. But there was in equal measure a significant amount of push button dullness and cliché incisively satirised by Roy Bayfield in his performance at the end of the week. Point the camera at a TV screen, point it at your feet whilst walking on grass or

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(preferably) snow,.....the eighties equivalent of the 'room film' of the mid-seventies, but without any structuralist overtones. Most of the students at the show had never heard of structuralist film, or wished they had never heard of it. Structuralism apparently died officially five years ago but the obituary was never published. Instead, the nearest one gets to a movement is via Derek Jarman, perhaps

the most profound single influence on eighties media art students.

Signs of change? Quite a few were affected by Mark Wilcox's deservedly plaudited 'Man of the Crowd' and his honest and realistic assessment. Perhaps a mutation from new narrative into old narrative, with characters and emotions and all the rest. And at the opposite polarity,

Jayne Parker's films dispense with any semblance of plot, character, or cliché, yet left a packed film theatre shaking themselves afterwards, as if all waking up from a long dream. New (old) narrative and new dreamism. Not exactly definitive new movements, but interesting trends. Let's hope the time and motion festivals of the nineties survive to follow them up ■

Steve Hawley

A COUNTRY PRACTICE: 'QUALITY SOAP'

John Tulloch and Albert Moran (Sydney - Currency Press)

Tucked away in Britain's daytime TV schedules are two prime examples of Australian Soaps - 'Neighbours' and 'A Country Practice'. Both have either been dismissed or ignored by the same group of TV critics and Media academics who have elevated British soaps like 'Coronation Street' and 'Brookside' (or US imports like 'Dynasty' and 'Dallas') to centre stage as significant examples of contemporary social melodrama; yet both series show the same concentration on familial and community issues as their British and American counter-parts, and in the case of 'A Country Practice' also produce a distinctive variation on the established themes and production styles.

'A Country Practice' is the most popular soap on Australian TV and it's also been a success on the international market. Though obviously specifically Australian in its setting and references, the soap concerns itself with a relatively international topic, small town life and the pressures of community living as represented in a community based around a small medical centre (the 'country practice' of the title). So far, so

unexceptional... But what lifts it out of the more obvious production line' aesthetic of other Australian Soaps like the much derided 'Young Doctors' is its clear address to specific social issues (in a similar matter to 'Brookside' and 'East Enders') combined with a high production value naturalist style.

Tulloch and Moran's book is a detailed production study of the series which moves from a historical contextualisation of 'A Country Practice's' relation to Australian TV traditions, through a detailed account of scripting, casting, shooting and scheduling to sections on audience response and the potential educational use of the series. Aside from the production details (which are useful in teaching the industrial conditions of TV production in Media Studies courses), the final sections around audience responses and educational perspectives are perhaps the most interesting, taking us beyond the straight-forward approach to audience monitoring set out in Millington and Nelson's production study of 'Boys from the Blackstuff' (1) and moving us more into the sort of territory explored by David Morley in his absorbing 'Family Television' study (2).

Prior to the introduction of daytime scheduling on British TV, one of the senior officers at the IBA disclosed that his main worry was the likelihood of British schedules being filled with cheap Australian 'dross'. Now that increasing areas of American programming are being legitimated as suitable for serious study, Australian soaps offer one of the few areas of TV still dismissed as 'industrial rubbish' - and as such deserve study if only to puncture the ex-colonialist racism implicit in such a judgment. 'A Country Practice' in particular deserves wider study as a 'quality' drama produced within a commercial system; as Tulloch and Moran's book shows, there are lessons to be learned (even from Antipodeans...)

Notes:

1. Bob Millington and Robin Nelson "'Boys from the Blackstuff' - The Making of a TV Drama' (Comedia £5.95).

2. David Morley 'Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure' (Comedia £5.95) ■

Philip Hayward