

# WINTER BREAK

Finnish journalist, **Ilppo Pohjola**, in London to research a programme on UK independent video, stops off to talk to **Catherine Elwes**

**C**atherine Elwes' work is an exception in independent video. Her tapes manage to avoid some of the typical problems that I have seen in British video over the years. On the one hand, slow-moving, self-referential work devoid of meaningful content - art for art's sake; and on the other, its counterpart, pure technical experimentation - effect for effect's sake. In Elwes' tapes, we can identify two major elements: first, a natural need to say something relevant, something that grows out of personal, suburban life, but which has relevance beyond this domestic context. Second, a commitment to visual experimentation in which form and style mirror and create the tape's content. Such an integrated approach is a rare phenomenon.

**Ilppo Pohjola:** One thing that's struck me, is that people no longer seem to be interested in general issues. They are only interested in doing tapes of their own surroundings, things that relate to them and their everyday lives.

**Catherine Elwes:** I'm certainly concerned with my immediate environment, with domestic experience. But if you look at it from a feminist perspective and take on the idea of the personal as political, you will see that the private is not separate from the political. The political invades our homes, it exists in the initial relationship between mother and child. Personal and political are interconnected and the best work will draw the political out of the private predicament. The least significant work will just become an internal, therapeutic meandering around a private world ... It's not necessary to spill the contents of your psyche onto the audience. There are different ways of investigating the personal. The personal has to become in

some sense a-personal for the political dimension to be drawn out.

**IP:** Would you describe your own work as part of New Narrative?

**CE:** I suppose I would, although I don't know that it exists as a category any more. It was an historical moment, but I certainly consider myself to be one of its descendents. I like to try and let people ease into a false sense of security and then pull them up sharply, show them how the thing is constructed, one woman's view, her fictions and fantasies. It is also important for me, and this perhaps comes out of a similar critique, to emphasise that it is me, I as a female, who is making the tape. It's through my eyes, my perceptions that people are momentarily experiencing the world. I try to use self-conscious ways of doing it. For example, *With Child* opens with a tight shot of my eyes staring into camera. The glasses are important because in cinema, the one with glasses is the intellectual, she is not desirable until she takes her glasses off and can be returned to the usual object position. The glasses insist on my status as subject. In the 80s, people argued that you couldn't move into the position as a woman. I do everything I can to prove that's not true.

It's helpful to see my tapes in the context of other feminist work. In the 70s there was analytical work by artists like Mary Kelly which took certain 'male' theories, structural linguistics, Marxist and Freudian theories which were used to build an important critique of femininity as a product of culture. There was something very academic and a little cold about it and it seemed to leave out whole areas of women's experience. At the other end of the scale there was urgent, highly personal work, very subjective and not subject to the usual art structures. I try to operate somewhere in the middle and bring in an element which I hardly dare describe as poetic, but I can't think of a better word for it ... Although I've used it, I feel that language is inadequate to describe a lot of what happens to me. It is indeed handmade and in the last few years I have felt

this very directly. For instance, I've never made a tape about childbirth ... words have failed me but I feel that pictures won't. I have moved towards a style which is much more visual and I hope more poetic. I feel that it's in that strange, non-specific visual area that things can be said which remain hidden in male theory or in anecdotes.

**IP:** *With Child* was a very personal tape; what were you trying to achieve in it?

**CE:** I wanted to make a visual diary of pregnancy and to include things that aren't normally associated with it. You are supposed to feel fantastic and fulfilled as a pregnant woman. But there is an underside that you don't often see. You can feel murderous not only towards yourself but also towards the child. You can also be very frightened. A pregnant woman is very seldom seen as sexual. Culturally, pregnancy has nothing to do with sex. In *With Child* I wanted to make an image of sexual passion. It was difficult for obvious reasons and I resorted to using toys and humour. The more difficult the subject matter, the more often I resort to humour.

**IP:** The toys and children's clothes could also be seen as a return to your own childhood.

**CE:** That is certainly one of the things that I experienced when I was pregnant. I spent a lot of time mentally reliving my childhood. There is no preparation at all for what you experience in pregnancy, during labour and in the many years beyond ... There is no institution of pregnancy, there is no religion surrounding it ... It reminds me of the old feminist joke that if men got pregnant, abortion would become a sacrament. The same is true of pregnancy.

**IP:** Someone has argued that the formalistic style of *With Child* turns the audience off. Do you think there's any truth in that?

**CE:** If it had been very passionate and emotional, then I would have been criticised for not having any formal sense, for being out of control, too 'female'. I've had both accusations at different times. What I try to do in general is to take images that are potentially sentimental or sexual, the face of a child, the image of a breast, the story of a

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pregnancy. I try to impose a formal visual structure on those images as a way of emphasising the ability of the female mind to structure material, to be objective whilst not denying the validity of the subjective experience the work is drawing on. To use a Jungian image, I'm attempting a kind of synthesis of the 'male' and 'female' side of my personality. I also think that the formal aspects of my work allow some space for the viewers to make something of it themselves, to project their own experiences into the piece.

**IP:** *Gunfighters* wasn't so personal, it was talking about male attitudes and feelings.

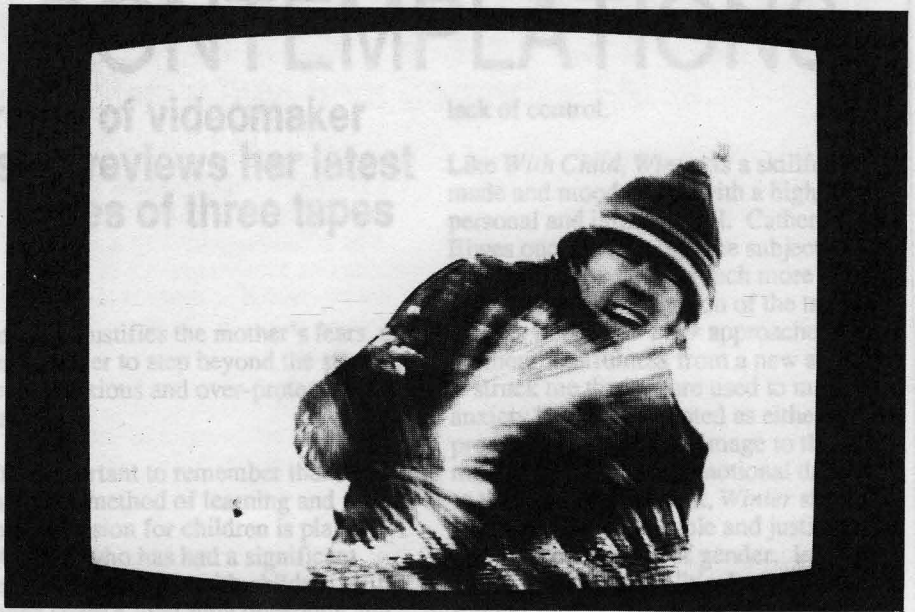
**CE:** It was personal in the way that it came about. I had my nephew staying one summer and he played with the boy next door. But the only game that they would play was gunfighting. I found this very distressing because I had a small son of my own and he was beginning to wave his spoon in the air and go bang bang. The tape grew out of this situation. In the shooting of the work all my preconceptions about why boys play these games were really blown apart and I discovered that there were all kinds of other things operating that I hadn't suspected. This is why the tape is divided into two parts. The first part is how the boys wanted it to be - as much like telly as possible. The second part is about me, about my confusions. I strung together all the questions I put to one of the boys, very few of his answers remained.

**IP:** Someone has argued that all the questions tell you about is a white, middle-class woman demanding why, why, why are you doing this?

**CE:** That's precisely why I edited out most of the boy's answers. I was making no pretence to say anything about him. The second half of that tape is about me, but also about how to undermine the power of an interviewer. The child revealed very little.

**IP:** Do you think that these ideas come through in the work? One person said that all you were left with was an Oxford accent.

**CE:** This is obviously someone who doesn't like my voice. England is a class society. I might have been just as irritated by someone from another 'class' speaking for that length of time. How I feel about it and how that person felt about me is irrelevant. What matters is that our voices fix us in a particular place within society. For me it was important to say that this tape was made by an



individual because I was not attempting to make a general statement about men's aggression. I was simply trying to put across what I felt about it, what I observed. I have been criticised in the past for not stating that I'm a middle-class woman, etc. You could argue that you should state at the beginning of every tape where you are coming from. I felt that it was important to say this in *Gunfighters*, which is why I didn't edit myself out. The person who made that comment seems to have misunderstood it - or maybe not, what he said is in some sense what I was trying to put across. I say 'He', I'm assuming it was a he.

**IP:** It was.

**CE:** Ah... So what did you make of *Winter*?

**IP:** I felt it was about being a mother whose child is getting older day by day, his growing marked by the seasons. He's moving away from her in terms of the relationship, not just geographically. He used to be part of her, under her control, but now she's worried about his safety in keeping with stereotypical images of the anxious mother. But then it changed into a kind of fear of loss to do with his being male and she being a woman. He's acquired male attitudes, taken on male behaviour. She is afraid of that. Does this coincide with what you were intending?

**CE:** Yes, the tape is about fear and loss, and implies things about the nature of the world he is moving into.

**IP:** I felt that the war/games analogy was a bit too easy. It may be my male

attitude, but it seemed simplistic to me.

**CE:** It is a theme that first appeared in *Gunfighters*. There is a huge difference between the games that girls play and those that boys play. It seems to be that it's not so very different from the kind of training that you see soldiers being put through. It becomes so automatic to be violent that they do it unquestioningly like well-trained children. My mother used to say 'not even in fun' when we pretended to fall off cliffs and the like. I felt like saying the same thing in the tape. I was also very aware that I could be dismissed as an hysterical mother, but I feel that I have a very clear view of what those games mean. I don't think they are just for fun.

**IP:** Maybe you have mixed feelings about being a mother. It seemed to come through in the music - a strange mixture of classical piano and a primitive drumbeat, one very integrated, harmonic, and the other suggested fear, anguish.

**CE:** For me the ambivalence in the tape or the contradiction is in the fact that much of the imagery I used is very beautiful, the child and the landscape. So there is another level of denial or protest in the tape. The mother is trying to say 'This is not beautiful any more than it is just good fun'. But I made the tape, the contradiction exists in life and in the work ■

## Ilppo Pohjola

'Winter' will be screened at the Tate in June and reviewed in next month's issue of *Independent Media*.