

SUBVERTING TELEVISION

1

deconstruct

selected by Mark Wilcox

2

scratch

selected by Michael O'Pray

3

alter image

selected by Alex Graham

A three part programme of British video art

dē-constrūc' tion

Deconstruct

This two-part programme gathers together a varied selection of visually exciting and demanding videotapes; some are historical, others are contemporary. Seminal works from the history of British video art, for instance, can be seen alongside the latest 'Scratch' work in which the boundaries between art and pop video melt away. Out of these unique juxtapositions a common thread can be teased which brings meaning to the present selection, which allows a new work, a new totality, to emerge under the banner of *Deconstruction*.

All the tapes, in one way or another, attack the beliefs and conventions which govern the way our world is represented on television and in the cinema. These conventions make the complicated process of putting a film or TV programme together invisible – as viewers, we're given a window on a world in which everything seems natural and ordered. In contrast, the following videotapes engage with that world, turn it on its head and force us to question our position as spectators.

The two programmes are both self-contained, a complementary echo of one another. They pursue the same argument, starting from an important early work of the late Modernist period when the material factors of video technology became the self-reflexive content of the videotape itself. Each programme moves onto Post-Modernist work of the early 1980's which picks up the challenge of representation and narrative, attempting to deconstruct the fictions which make up our reality – albeit with another fiction. The two programmes are finally brought up to date with work by a younger generation of artists and include a selection of 'Scratch' video. The scratch artists borrow eclectically from the image depositories of mainstream film and TV, making a radical critique of contemporary society – a society dominated by the media and by the mediated image.

Video art in the 1970's got a bad name; it was meant to be boring, interminable and either austere or narcissistic. What might be surprising for new viewers is just how exciting, pithy and sensual the two works from this period by David Hall look. Recorded on crude black and white equipment, *TV Fighter* compiles a powerful sequence of archive war footage, originally shot from cameras mounted on the nose of fighter planes as they strafe enemy targets. The spectator is pinned down in the hot seat, vicariously experiencing the excitement of speed and danger and also aware of the destruction in which s/he is implicated – just by looking. This videotape highlights the ambiguous position of the viewer, safe in the darkness of the auditorium but gripped by a spectacle which is clearly an illusion, yet also forms a visceral experience.

David Hall's *This is a Television Receiver* is one of the few pieces of video art created to be broadcast on British TV. As such, it should be considered as 'television' – what is experienced in an auditorium or gallery today is a video record of a work originally beamed unannounced into peoples' homes. The well known TV newsreader, Richard Baker, delivers a didactic text which exposes the illusion that a human being is talking to us. We learn from him, for instance, that his voice is emitting not from his lips but from a loudspeaker in the TV set. This address is repeated and each time the image and sound are re-recorded and degenerated his face and voice become more grotesquely distorted. This figure of authority is reduced to what, in essence, he is – a series of pulsating patterns of light on the surface of a glass screen. In this way, paradoxically, the verbal statement is realised by its own disintegration, along with that of the image. The illusion of both transparency and of power are shattered. This is deconstruction in its primary, irreducible form; only by remembering these important lessons have artists subsequently been able to venture out of the enclosure of self-reflexivity and into the perilous world of representation and narrative.

John Adams is such an artist. We are guided through *Sensible Shoes* by the voice of a woman who narrates a complex and bizarre story. As a Post Modernist text this tape is both literary and poetic; it presents a reality made up of compounded fictions, sometimes competing, sometimes complementary. The leading characters are never seen; instead the camera explores a room in which a TV set is playing, as an oblique relationship develops between what we hear and what we see. Images of cat food and of violent, macho TV heroes accompany a tale of love, betrayal and revenge.

One of the lessons of Post Modernism is that there are many ways to tell a story. *Calling the Shots* remakes a technicolour sequence from a 1950's Hollywood movie – not once but three times. It progressively exposes the artifice and mechanics of production; behind the painted set plus poised actors, lie cameras, lights and technicians. Reconstruction becomes deconstruction. Simultaneously questions of the representation of women are raised and the power politics of gender are explored. The tape is funny and disturbing, a piece of subliminal agit-prop for the liberation of women and men from stifling roles.

Another point of attack on mainstream film and TV is through the eyes of personal experience. This has been the greatest strength of the excellent feminist video art which has emerged in Britain. Catherine Elwes' *The Critic's Informed Viewing* is a restless, meandering journey through an evening's viewing in front of the box. The woman in this piece is not an object designed for the gaze of men but is instead a critical, active observer. She is the viewer, not the viewed. The artist as armchair critic examines the way in which TV represents women and even intervenes in the playback of the videotape itself; freezing frames, flipping channels, cracking jokes and munching on a TV dinner. However, despite the throwaway lines and glib remarks, we know by the end of the tape that there aren't any easy answers. Exploring the same problem of spectatorship which David Hall looks at in *TV Fighter*, she comes to a perhaps similar conclusion; we have a dreadful fascination for what is bad for us, that which turns us into passive and powerless consumers of the image.

Graham Young's *Nil by Mouth* is also, in a different way, personal. The tape is an unedited record of what is, in effect, a performance by the artist – delivered not to a live audience but to a static camera. Taking the opposite approach of the scratchers who cut fast and furious to convey their message, Young instead presents us with the power of slow, even mundane, human activity. The artist gradually removes all the fittings of his room, including a radio receiver and TV set during a simultaneous stereo broadcast of a Beethoven symphony. We are watching what can only be described as an act of physical deconstruction. The illusion of realistic film and TV is utterly dependent upon the magical cohesion of sound and image. The tape makes a powerful assault on this tyranny of synchronised sound in a series of bizarre visual jokes. Richard Baker again appears and, prompted by the title *Nil by Mouth*, we conclude that as in David Hall's piece the voice of authority (or in this case of high culture) is but a ventriloquist's trick.

A precursor of much recent scratch work, *The Science Mix* by Steve Hawley and Tony Steyger takes us into a grouping of videotapes which use almost exclusively pre-editing footage. This tape re-cuts and fuses two adverts for washing machines; one from the 1950's, the other from the 80's. Using only this original source material the tape creates a dialogue between two media visions of a technological utopia – both equally absurd and disturbing.

Sandra Goldbacher and Kim Flitcroft's *Night of 1000 Eyes* is an epic of scratch video. Created not only for an art video audience but also for playback in a nightclub context, it is structured around and cut to a number of electro-funk dance tracks. It is also concerned with post Freudian concepts of pleasure – both to be celebrated and to be problematized. And foremost of pleasures in our visually orientated culture is looking. Kitsch Hollywood and Hammer horror films are broken down by machine-gun like edits which repeat themselves obsessively. Here the act of deconstruction is to distill and make manifest the hidden violence and sexuality in the products of mainstream film and TV. However, the scratch edit itself fetishes the filmic fragment and is a source of uneasy pleasure. This work is ambiguous, both diagnostic and celebratory; it exposes the pathology of contemporary experience latent in the cinema and on TV in a deeply pleasurable way.

Jeremy Welsh's *I.O.D.* is similarly seductive: a meditation on the 'media culture' of Western society as we slip into the apocalyptic anxiety common to the end of each century. He portrays a culture overloaded and polluted with visual and aural information. The tape consists of images and sounds electronically processed, overlaid and

finally abstracted into a fluid and sensual pattern. Superimposed is the text; "A glut of imagery... Images of despair... Images of desire... Images of destruction... Images of deconstruction". It is at this level of poetic analysis that the tape can perhaps be seen as a theoretical rationale for the structurally very different scratch video. The problem of 'information overdose' is both stated and revealed before our eyes. It is all the more a problem in that *I.O.D.* celebrates the fascination of our entropic decline into a vortex of indiscriminate information. It is up to the scratchers to provide one answer to this problem.

There is a sense of moral outrage in the cluster of 'hard-core' scratch tapes which complete the present selection; *Amen*, *Death Valley Days*, *Tory Stories*, *War Machine* and *Blue Monday*. Unlike the fluid scratching of Welsh and the Goldbacher/Flitcroft team which exploits all the sensual effects of video processing, these hard-edged works depend on the classic principles of film montage. Despite their modernity and pop influences they have many precedents reaching back into the history of film. In 1941 British cinema audiences enjoyed *Germany Calling...The Lambeth Walk* as part of their weekly entertainment. In this propaganda short Hitler was seen goose-stepping backwards and forwards repeatedly, in re-cut footage which had him prancing to the popular tune of the day. The political opposition, the didactic ends, the moral alarm remain the same but the subjects are now Reagan, Thatcher, the police state and nuclear war. Simultaneously scratch attacks television, stealing off-air images from the broadcast channels and forcing them into new, humorous and disturbing juxtapositions. It answers back, using the very same images to interrupt the one-way stream of information. Scratch moves from deconstruction to the reconstruction of values and meaning, to a moral order in an overloaded culture.

It should be said in conclusion that the selection of work described here is neither a "state of the art" survey nor a history of British video art. It has no such pretensions. However, if it indicates some of the intellectual challenge and visual richness to be found in such work it will have achieved its purpose, whilst exploring an important cultural and political theme.

Mark Wilcox

This programme of tapes was originally selected for tour on the Netherlands Video Circuit. Mark Wilcox would like to thank the British Council, London Video Arts, Michael O'Pray and the artists involved.

Programme 1

- David Hall, *This is a Television Receiver* (8 mins 1976)
- Steve Hawley/Tony Steyger, *Drawing Conclusions - The Science Mix* (6 mins 1983)
- Graham Young, *Nil by Mouth* (13 mins extract 1983)
- Catherine Elwes, *The Critic's Informed Viewing* (10½ mins extract 1982)
- Mark Wilcox, *Calling the Shots* (13 mins 1984)
- Off the Record, *Tory Stories* (6½ mins 1984)
- Duvet Brothers, *War Machine* and *Blue Monday* (5½ mins 1984)

Programme 2

- David Hall, *TV Fighter (Cam Era Plane)* (10 mins 1977)
- John Adams, *Sensible Shoes* (11 mins 1983)
- Jeremy Welsh, *I.O.D.* (9 mins 1984)
- Sandra Goldbacher/Kim Flitcroft, *Night of 1000 Eyes* (27 mins 1984)
- Nick Cope/391, *Amen (Survive the Coming Hard Times)* (3½ mins 1984)
- Jon Dovey/Gavin Hodge/Tim Morrison, *Death Valley Days* (10½ mins extract 1984)



Calling the Shots