tle and impudence) and the inhibited but -hearted English Captain Molyneux (Shaun tt timidly charming) which becomes a distilla- n of opposing national characteristics without ing any of its psychological accuracy.

On the opening night Stephen Moore's schem- property thief and woman-stealing villain was sed. This is melodrama, and not all of it pervious to Irish stereotyping (Gillian Barge has go a long way to account for the Shaughraun's east-beating, consummately dim Oirish other); but the cast plays so infectiously, and th such evident fun, that the evening has no hint that fixed-smile deadliness I found in the RSC's tempts at romps like *Fair Maid of the West*. Here a robustness, even a sexiness.

Perhaps the strong young women of the play, eated of their estate a final time and come to onnegal for work, might have turned eventually to the oppressed shirt-checkers of **The Factory Irls**. Frank McGuinness' play, like his later, ize-winning *Observe the Sons of Ulster March- g to the Somme*, puts a group of differing types f people of one sex in a tight spot in one room and es this to make them explore their lives.

The five checkers in a shirt factory — who esumably never wear the fruits of their labour — e, except for the youngest, "girls" only by dint f their subservience within and without the ctory walls. Una (Doreen Hepburn) is old nough to remember walking out in wartime with n American GI who dumped her; her mate, the ough-talking Ellen, nicknamed Godzilla (Pat avy), saw her three children die of TB. Rose- ary (Tina Kellegher) is the silent one whose rivers un deep, and naturally, in this schematic play, here is a hint of lesbianism. Men are referred to as 'old shites": when two of them turn up to force he girls into lower wages they are as incompetent nd shabby-minded as their (male) creator can nake them. When the women stage a sit-in, a husband exerts moral blackmail to bring her home nd the priest refuses their plea of a special Mass. The final moments of the play see the women workers, having gone through an extended group herapy session nearly entirely for our benefit, giving up their protest. The play is saved from its anartistic Good Intentions and misery-cataloguing didacticism by the authenticity of its actresses.

My favourite image of the Dublin journalist Nell McCafferty's first play is that of the speaker's mother dancing with her father, torn between the wallet in his chest announcing he's kept back his pay and his hand in the small of her back pressing her on to the waltz. Romance is **The Worm in the Heart** in this one-woman monologue, or so its heroine tells us. But on the evidence of its fairly embittered first-generation woman engineer, born to the "last of the full-time mothers", romance is a pretty dodgy concept.

The burden of McCafferty's strange diatribe against the world is that to be Irish and a woman is to be doubly a loser. Set in Southern Ireland, it tells us a bit about subjects ranging from the feminist position on Northern Ireland (there isn't one) to the parliamentary secretaries' occupation of the men's loos in the Dail, in tones which usually contain too much generalised bitterness to be effective. Directed by Gillian Hackett, it does succeed in introducing Londoners to Ruth McCabe, another female Irish performer of awe- some persuasiveness.

VIDEO

Cooking for terrorists

Julian Petley

Early scratch video was a pirate: it plundered sounds and images, sliced them to shreds, rearranged them regardless of narrative laws. Half a decade on, what's become of it?

NOTHING MORE CLEARLY illustrates capitalism's ability to turn protest into profit than this: the transformation of scratch video from a weapon of guerilla warfare to just another flourish in the ad-men's repertoire of second-hand images.

The fact that scratch has been hijacked, however, shouldn't blind us to its achievements. Looking back at **The Greatest Hits of Scratch**, Volumes One and Two, one is still struck by the considerable, almost Eisensteinian, force of the Duvet Brothers' montages in *Blue Monday, War Machine* and *Till Death to Apartheid*, and the sensuous visual and aural qualities of George Barber's *Scratch Free State, Tilt, Yes Frank No Smoke,* and *Absence of Satan*. It was Barber, in fact, who put the two compilations together — and he has since gone on to become one of the most interesting figures from the scratch moment.

Barber first became seriously involved in video at St Martins College of Art, which he left in 1980. From 1982 to 1984 he studied video at postgraduate level at the Slade, exploring his interest not only in film and television but also in painting. His leanings in these rather different directions resulted in a final show which he describes as "mingling disco music and video art together, without deliberate irony, for the first time".

He says that he has always been drawn to the "lushness of the look of the televisual and filmic image" and this is certainly borne out by his contributions to the two *Greatest Hits* compilations, which, with surprisingly modest resources, combine highly treated images and equally densely mixed soundtracks. In particular *Yes Frank No Smoke* stunningly resumes the watery images that haunt Barber's work, taking under-sea shots from *The Deep* and *The Blue Lagoon* and completely reworking them in a way that enhances their visual qualities and divorces them from their original narrative purposes. Meanwhile, *The Brotherhood of Satan* and *Absence of Malice* are ransacked and re-integrated in *Absence of Satan*: mundane actions, casual phrases, everyday gestures are repeated over and over to chime with the pounding pulse of the soundtrack, rendering the familiar strange and achieving moments of lyricism as powerful as they are mysterious.

On the basis of such work, it isn't surprising that Barber was selected as the first recipient of a grant (about £2,000) from the £50,000 video fund which the BFI Production Board set up last year. The result, **Taxi Driver 2**, bears comparison with Mark Wilcox's *Calling the Shots* (reviewed *NS* 15 April).

Here, Barber's evident fascination with the glittering surface of Hollywood imagery moves away from an exploration of the play of surface flow, from stripping images of their narrative significance and working on their purely formal qualities, towards articulating a new narrative structure. This revolves around Tim West, an advertising executive who is also developing a C4 programme on cooking for terrorists. Disillusioned by the hyper-reality of the media world, he joins a Robert de Niro evening class, but also falls under the pastoral influence of Johnny Morris.

From the opening images of night-time, car-ridden streets accompanied by langorous sax on the soundtrack, through to the sub-Chandleresque voice-over narration ("My name is Tim West, I've always been a bit of a loner at the ad agency") *Taxi Driver 2* strikes you with its sly knowingness. But it's more than just a clever-clever nod in the direction of contemporary *film noir*, just as it's more than an incestuous joke at the expense of the London-based media world: it is also a telling comment on the contemporary media culture of postmodernism. As Tim's voice-over puts it, while the endless traffic rolls on: "At work 100, maybe 200 ideas are thought up every day, but when I go home at night and lie down they all seem the same." In this context, the macho movie posturings of De Niro are as much of a dead-end response to modern urban angst as the gentler illusions conjured by Johnny Morris' TV persona.

Similar concerns run through **The Venetian Ghost**, also funded by the BFI (though at £10,000 this cost a good deal more than its predecessor). Here, the ghost of an 18th-century Venetian Doge finds itself living in a shallow, superficial household on Venice Beach, California. The role of the ghost was originally envisaged for Spaulding Gray and much of the humour emerges from the Doge's comments on the soap-style domestic dramas of Charlie, his unwitting host. But the real strength of the video is in its elegiac, melancholy shots of amusement parks, freeways, streets and shopping malls over which the Doge muses Kundera-like on life in the perpetual present: "To Charlie the only thing important in life is style and good times. It's funny living with a guy with no memory."

Fuzzy shots of Venice alternate with images of American consumerdom as the Doge ponders on how "people today spend so much time thinking how life could be. Everywhere you look there are pictures telling you how to lead your life, but when I look at them all I see is death . . . How people long for these things while deliberately letting them pass by". In the end, of course, Charlie and his ilk come to seem even more insubstantial than the ghost, the Doge's Venice more real than the soulless, memoryless streets, shops and beaches.

Both *Taxi Driver 2* and *The Venetian Ghost* refuse to fit easily into video art or narrative fiction categories, but that is precisely the source of their fascination and pleasure. An analogy might perhaps be found in Godard, circa *Deux ou trois choses*, where the narrative is constantly and playfully fractured by other elements, where different kinds of narration jostle against each other, where lyricism and humour overlap and a particular story is "enlarged" in such a way as to take on wider resonances.

With the exception of "The Venetian Ghost", all of George Barber's videos are available from London Video Arts, 23 Frith Street, London W1V 5TS. "The Venetian Ghost" will be shown next month at the Piccadilly Film Festival.