

IAN BOURN

Essays and Notes on Video Works

including:

The Lost High Road
by Felicity Sparrow

A Kind of Self Portrait
by Ian Bourn

TITLE **ARTISTS**

DETAIL

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IAN BOURN - PROFILE

Ian Bourn has been making videos since the late 70s, at a time when most video artists were experimenting with black and white low-band U-matic, and relatively few homes had video recorders.

However it was the medium's means of playback - on domestic-TV-like monitors - which attracted Bourn, who saw the potential for using the familiarity of television's modes of address to develop his own highly personal and idiosyncratic style. Taking his cue less from contemporary artists' film and more from televisual conventions, with a particular antipathy for TV's portrayal of the 'cheeky Cockney chappie', he set out to develop his own pantheon of imaginary tragi-comic characters, pitched somewhere between Tony Hancock and Harold Pinter.

Bourn has described his single-screen video work as 'a kind of portraiture that examines role-play and the viewer's relationship with people portrayed on film.' As well as being a consummate writer, Bourn is also an actor, often appearing in his own and other's work. The blurring of fiction and autobiography is what gives the work its edge. This is paralleled in his work for 'Housewatch', a mixed-media group co-founded by Bourn in 1985, in which the facades of real houses are used, their illuminated windows presenting the passer-by with an illusory, fictional interior.

The Lost High Road: from Lenny's Documentary to Monolog

One strand of Bourn's work features sharply observed characters, low-life desperados who talk to camera about their lives and the world as they see it. Superficially 'diary' films in that their temporal construction seems transparent, they are in fact fictions, acted by Bourn who plays out his characters. It is Bourn's face we see, delivering monologues, acting out rituals. His introspections are bleak, end-of-the-road visions, tempered by wry humour. However the power of his direct address lies in our, the audience's, recognition of, and possible identification with the on-screen persona. Like the diarist, Bourn filters and extracts what he has observed and heard, often using tape recordings



Filming [Sick As A Dog](#) by Ian Bourn, 1989

and hand-written diaries, notebooks and sketches as raw material. Coupled with his ear for dialogue, with all its repetitions and hesitations, Bourn also has an eye for the small gestures and mannerisms of the people he observes, their clothes, their style, their way of presenting themselves to the world. This attention to detail has enabled him to literally 'become' the character he is portraying, often living 'in-role' during extended pre-production. Bourn has described these portraits as 'visions of my life as somebody else.'

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IAN BOURN - PROFILE

In *Lenny's Documentary* (1978), Bourn as Lenny sits at his desk, in his den, surrounded by familiar objects, his props.

An opening caption reads '11pm Leytonstone'. Lenny whistles, picks up beer cans, searches his pockets, leans back and lights a cigarette then riffles through his script, mumbling and humming, then writes 'Gateway to the East'. Another inter-title caption reads '5 minutes later': Lenny's still sitting there, confident, fiddling with a tape recorder, smoking, muttering inaudibly. Then he erupts, cursing 'You're a cunt. I'm talking to you - oi, you're a cunt'. Lenny is looking to one side, off-screen. Maybe he's talking to a mirrored image of himself, like Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, or maybe he's remembering being slung out of the pub for obnoxious behaviour. Two inter-titles later Lenny gets underway, 'Who better to talk about Leytonstone than Lenny? Take it away Lenny - What can I say that hasn't already been said? Er that's not it. Cut.'

Lenny is a fictitious character. As Bourn himself has written 'a mixture of all the friends I hung about with and people I met on the streets of Leytonstone. But he was also a possible version of myself, expressing things I'd never been able to before. The objectivity it allowed me meant I could mix humour and seriousness in what was an incredibly bleak vision of the world.' Lenny struggles to articulate but he's never lost for words, they pour out of him in stream-of-consciousness fashion, like a Samuel Beckett character: he must go on saying what he means, whilst making meanings of what's in his head.

Lenny's head-and-shoulder image is that of television's authoritative factual-programme presenter - he is after all an authority on Leytonstone and its environs.



Still from *Lenny's Documentary* by Ian Bourn, 1978

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IAN BOURN - PROFILE

Sick As a Dog (1989) features another low-lifer, Terry Childs. Here Bourn, nattily attired in red jacket and tie, standing in front of Walthamstow Stadium, talks to camera like a television sports commentator.

Terry is a dog-racing gentleman and is making a film about his research into the behaviour of winning greyhounds. 'Dear Viewer,' his tone is intimate, confident, as he introduces his Super-8mm 'research' footage and track-side video diary with the promise of passing on his winning tips. To the whirr of a projector we see grainy shots of dogs, then Terry himself at home projecting his movie, his living room a make-shift cinema-cum-location backdrop for the job in hand. He seems cocky but, despite the wads of money, the pouring over of form-books, his intriguing 'crap theory' (based on dogs' craps prior to a race) and his many aphorisms ('a bitch on heat can't be beat') Terry is clearly a small-timer, using dole money for stake. It's all bravura; his life is coming apart at the seams. To cap it, his girlfriend leaves him, interrupting his filming when she drops by to collect her things. She is scathing about Terry's lifestyle. As he hits rock bottom he carries out a one-sided conversation with an imagined father-figure, someone who, unlike Terry, is keen on self betterment. Terry tries to justify himself but his utter isolation, the absurdity of it all, saps his resolve: the film ends with his 'it's getting through to me tonight.'

Bourn kept a diary during the year preceding Sick as a Dog's production. It is the most textured of Bourn's films, interweaving S-8mm, video-diary footage and garish titles with his to-camera soliloquising. The films within the film also allow Bourn to extend his territory, to Walthamstow and Romford stadiums. Here, although 'real', the quality of the stretched S-8mm gives a dream-like or hyper-real effect, as if this were archive footage of a world now gone, only existing in memory. Visually, it is very seductive: the dogs, both parading prior to the race and belting round the track, the handlers, the bookies, the punters, the bars, the whole ambience of the stadium and its allure for a good night out. It seems a world away from the claustrophobia of Lenny's den and Terry's kitchen. Perhaps one clue lies in Terry's parting words: 'People from the track, they're all people I got educated to get away from. That's what you do...'



Still from *Sick as a Dog* by Ian Bourn, 1989

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Monolog (1998), also features a nocturnal vision of downfall.

By contrast to Lenny and Sick as a Dog it is more pared down, more Beckett-like. Bourn's image has gone, all we glimpse is his shadow on the pavement, cast from the sodium glare of street lights as he perambulates the Leytonstone nightscape. Described by Bourn as 'a pedestrian road movie,' its narrative is the walk itself. Unseen, the protagonist is Grant Lawrence, a travelling salesman, suffering an identity crisis following the break-up of his marriage and a recent trip to Japan. The tape begins in Japan, with the sound of a man practising Japanese phrases over images of a nondescript urban landscape filmed from the window of a coach. From a hotel room we hear snatches of television and see the neon hoardings of downtown Osaka. A voice dictates a letter 'Dear Personnel Officer' The voice is Grant's, referring to himself in the third person, rubbishing his disastrous relationships and his poor salesmanship skills. Back in Leytonstone, Grant wanders the streets talking to himself: 'Nobody in this business seems to get through it unscathed.' He passes brightly-lit shop windows, taking mental stock of his life, revisiting his encounters in Japan. As he turns down side streets flanked by parked cars, his view is of serried rows of terraced houses, their windows curtained and blank against the night, their occupants in bed. Or so Grant supposes, as he imagines the limited 'auto-pilot' lives of the sleeping inhabitants. Apart from the odd passing car, the monotony of his journey is unbroken. Focusing in on the paving slabs, 'Now I watch my step, keep off the cracks,' he contemplates a new pared-down life, stripped of pretences and without all the exaggerated empty gestures he witnesses in his fellow citizens. The sudden cut to a snow-covered rural landscape, glimpsed like the opening shot from a moving train, is a metaphor for the stark greyness of his life. But even the bleakest of winters has to give way to spring.

Although Grant Lawrence is another composite character, a role that Bourn assumed for the duration of his filming, Monolog draws on autobiographical



Still from **Monolog** by Ian Bourn, 1998

detail. The film's genesis is in two unrealised projects *Tips for Travelling Salesmen*, a series of sketches based on Bourn's encounters with salesmen whilst working at his father's hardware store, and *Ten Bulls*, the misadventures of an English sales rep in Japan, a proposed episodic reworking of a classic Buddhist text. Bourn's fascination with Japanese culture is longstanding and includes learning the language. Several visits there (researching Housewatch's 'Paperhouse' tour) and an eye for the traits of out-of-place sales reps led to the characterisation of Grant. His monologue touches on themes common to all of Bourn's work: of alienation, of marginal people who struggle to make sense of a world from which they feel excluded.

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IAN BOURN - PROFILE

Of Course, There Were Other Cups of Tea.

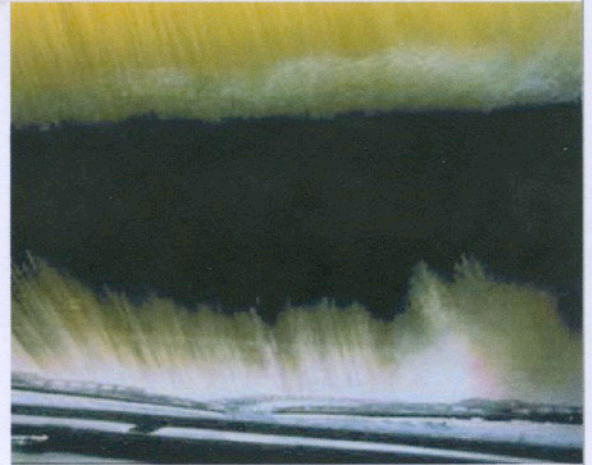
Another strand in Bourn's work is the playful, dramas created from the minutiae of life which knowingly depend on our sense of recognition for their humour. Rather than the fixed shot or long take of the 'diary', these usually consist of multiple shots and viewpoints, either edited for single-screen monitor playback or presented as multi-screen expanded-cinema work with Housewatch.

The End of the World (1982) is perhaps Bourn's best known work, having been shown as part of Channel 4's Ghosts in the Machine series and extensively toured in the UK and abroad by the British Council. It is a perfect short film, haiku-like in its simplicity. Almost nothing happens. A man interrupts his video game to make his girlfriend a cup of tea, then takes it out to the garden where she is lounging in a deckchair, together they sit enjoying this sunny suburban idyll.

The protagonists are Bourn himself and the late artist, Helen Chadwick, both role-playing, acting out a 'what-if' scenario of domestic harmony. As in so much of Bourn's work details go unexplained, they're there for one to note, their oddity to be deciphered or just taken for granted. Like the house is unfurnished: just bare floorboards, an armchair, a video-game console, the kettle on the floor next to the tea-tray. If this is an enigma, the garden is even more bizarre: leylandii trees like regimented soldiers line the fence; in the lawn, a curving path of flagstones that goes nowhere.

End of the World sets up a pattern of cutting, between inside and outside, his view and her view, mirror-like reflections, close-ups and long-shots, which mimics the way many television dramas establish that something important is about to happen. Given its title, we anticipate a portentous event. What we get is a tea ceremony.

This playfulness is also evident in Bourn's shortest works: visual gags which subvert audience's expectations. In Out of It (1991), a one-minuter made for the BBC's Late Show, what we think is a man taking a piss turns out to be something altogether different. The Kiss (1999), made in collaboration with John Smith and originally shown as

Still from [Alfred Hitchcock](#), 2000

part of a Housewatch presentation as a multi-screen projection, also plays with genre expectations. Featuring a lily, what seems to be a time-lapse birth-of-a-flower, typical of scientific horticultural films, turns out to be a more sinister process.

Sandwich-making and mugs of tea feature in *The Good Value Café* (1986), another multi-screen presentation made for Housewatch's 'Cinematic Architecture for the Pedestrian'. Diners and chef appear, each on separate windows of a house, back-projected, for viewing from the street outside, the ensemble comprising the interior of a typical working-man's cafe. Each character, Bourn amongst them, waits for his food, eats, or reads the newspaper while commenting on the topics of the day. Subject matters range from the Miners' Strike, to the artistic merits of Poussin, to greyhounds. Each airs his opinions and pontificates on life in general. The effect was (for its complexity can't be repeated) a visual and verbal tour-de-force, anticipating in macro-form the split-screen formats of Mike Figgis' *Time Code* and *Hotel*.

This playing with different forms of narrative and points of view extends to the short experiment *Breathing Days* (1992), about one man's dealings with authority figures. Instead of reverse cutting between characters or deploying double-projection, the glass barrier between interviewer and interviewee is used as a reflective device, so that both appear together, superimposed on screen.

Bourn's recent *Alfred Hitchcock* (2000) returns to Lenny's terrain. An unseen Bourn and his companion, mini-cab driver and sometime rock musician Alan Freedman, drive through Leytonstone and its environs, chatting amiably of murder and firearms. Freedman is an expert on the latter, makes his own bullets and carries gun and ammunition in his car. Their round-about journeys take them to scenes which recall Hitchcock's films (the fairground in *Strangers on a Train*, *The Birds*) until finally, on the wall of a petrol station, they find the Waltham Forest Heritage plaque: 'Alfred Joseph Hitchcock was born near this site at 517 High Road Leytonstone on August 13th 1899...'

Bourn appears but briefly, in the b/w prologue, when be-suited and Hitch-like, standing in front of theatrical curtains, he introduces the film in similar style to the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* television series, offering to throw light on the subject of film entertainment.

Ironically, despite its theatricality, this is the 'real' Ian Bourn, the film-maker introducing his film, a far cry from the character in *Lenny's Documentary*; it is also his voice, his chuckles, we hear from the car, just as it is the 'real' Leytonstone we see, rather than the hinterland of Lenny or Terry or Grant.

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