

## SOUR GRAPES

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It is one of the fallacies of the moment in video circles that making high-technology derived imagistic tapes is a sure sign of shallow ideas and artistic opportunism. For some such work lacks the rigour, intellectual purity and seriousness associated with formalist work or the political and social awareness and commitment of documentarist video. It is also implied that high-tech work is easier to produce, simply a matter of pressing the right buttons and finding the right pop-music soundtrack. However, bad formalist work is just as easy to make – find an object or surface texture and leave the camera running, and, on the documentary front, one has seen the result of cobbling together a few interviews mixed with shots of urban dereliction. There seems to be no necessary connection between the complexity or otherwise of production methods and the quality of the ensuing tape. Equally, as we all know, most bad art is made with the best of intentions – in fact, it is the visibility of the latter in the former that is characteristic. There is a further factor lurking in the background here and that is the difficulty felt by many video makers of obtaining access to equipment – hire rates are often too high even in the independent sector. This is a real problem and one that can lead to genuine bitterness and despair for those whose projects outstrip their finances. Inevitably, these feelings are displaced into the activity of criticism itself, and those with access and funding are branded as an elite, or worst still, their work is judged not for itself but by its means of production.

In a spate of articles published over the past few months, there has been some discussion of the state of video art very much around these issues. A variety of judgments, prejudices and confusions have been expressed by Mike Dunford ('Video Art: the Dark Ages' *Undercut* no 16; 'Subverting Television?' *Independent Video* no 55) and by Nick Houghton ('Joining the Dub Club: Funkers, Scratch and Big Noise' *Undercut* no 16). All three pieces have pointed the finger at the rise of video technology and its 'misuse'. All are rather negative – telling us what they think is wrong, laced with personal abuse and innuendo, but not being very clear as to what they want, except in the most general terms. If they have problems citing work of which they approve, there is no difficulty drawing up names of those who represent what they dislike – George Barber,

John Maybury, Mark Wilcox, Duvet Brothers, Jez Welch, Marty St James and Ann Wilson and Gorilla Tapes. For example, Dunford remarks that George Barber's work 'slips very easily into pop-video iconography and technique thereby assuring him potential employment in Thatcher's Britain'. This is a puerile piece of innuendo implying that getting a job under the Tories is somehow a shameful act. One can only assume that the 'revolutionary' Mr Dunford is keeping his labour power pure and intact until better times. In his article in *Independent Video* Dunford homes in on Mark Wilcox's tape *Calling the Shots* and asserts that one 'could almost hear the sigh of relief in the British Arts Council video offices, at being able to fund traditional narrative video again, of being smugly self-righteous since the video contains . . . its own disclaimer'. Firstly, as the person who worked on the touring package that included *Calling the Shots* and that had the overall title 'Subverting Television' which Dunford uses, surely knowingly, as the title of his piece, there was to my knowledge no sigh of relief. Secondly, by no stretch of the imagination is the tape a traditional narrative, and thirdly, films and videos are funded by a committee system and not simply by the Arts Council's officers. Moreover much of the work discussed by Dunford was not funded by the Arts Council at all – no scratch work was funded by them, nor was much of the earlier work of the New Romantics.

Much of Dunford's article is framed by a confusing Marxism in which he can claim that 'the sedimented relationships of a virulent patriarchy – domination and exploitation – form the model and basis for all other forms of capitalist exploitation' (my emphasis). A fundamental anti-Marxist view, I would have thought, that makes little sense of the present struggles of black working classes in South Africa, for example. Nick Houghton reserves his spleen in two lengthy footnotes for John Maybury and the Duvet Brothers. Again, character assassination is to the fore. Maybury's video *Circus Logic* is derided because it was shot at the ICA, it contains Maybury's 'chums', and Maybury himself is a 'cause célèbre among certain factions of the Capital's art-rockers'. If only art criticism was so easy. Whilst not wanting to claim that Maybury justifies being in the same company, Houghton in the 1920s could have said the same of Cocteau, Richter, Mayakovsky, Eisenstein, Man Ray . . . who used the high-tech of their day, filmed their 'chums' and were also courted by society fashion-setters. This kind of *ad hominem* argument has been one of the nastiest enemies of art since its beginnings. Similarly, the Duvet Brothers

are branded by the fact that they work in a video production unit and that their work has been taken up by the media. Very little art has escaped the clutches of the media – Surrealist adverts and fashion photography, 'montage' Hollywood movies, Constructivist LP covers, Abstract expressionist wallpaper designs and so on. A kind of 'repressive tolerance', perhaps.

As to the substance of the articles, Dunford and Houghton both attempt to draw parallels between video art and experimental film, with the former coming second best. Houghton feels that that the slower and more labour-intensive film medium encourages 'deeper' thought in the resulting work, whereas the quick technology of video leads to shallowness and a surface style. Dunford, on the other hand, perceives the lack in video art of a structural/political tradition important in the British film co-operative movement in the 1970s. But video did have its artists working in a similar oppositional vein – David Hall, Stuart Marshall and Tamara Krikorian to name just a few. The collapse of the conceptualist/structural movement was not confined to film, or for that matter video. It is by no means clear that that work has ceased to exist; rather, it seems to have fragmented and been absorbed into other projects.

For Houghton to cast an envious eye on film seems to show some reluctance on his part to take on board the hard fact that video is a high-tech medium and always was, compared to film, which still uses nineteenth-century machinery that has barely changed since its inception. Steve Hawley in the same issue of *Undercut* faces the same issue with a calm exploration of two artists Bill Viola, and John Sanborn, who have used high-tech means to produce high quality work. Hawley's own video work is a prime example of someone who does not shun technological effects but instead seeks to control them for his own expressive ends. Hawley's article has no hint of malice towards his fellow artists and throws a sharp light on Dunford's and Houghton's ill-tempered negativism.

The paucity of video criticism in this country, with the exception of the excellent *Independent*, should make these articles welcome, particularly for their intention to raise the debate, but the name-calling simply reaffirms prejudices and provokes more name-calling which is always easier than judging the work itself. Video does not have a large body of criticism or theory which can afford sniping at its edges as in other art forms. The existence of only one magazine dedicated to video art in this country testifies to that fact.

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