

THIS YEAR'S MODEL: MORE FROM SCOTLAND

Scotland Media

Doug Aubrey reviews the post-graduate diploma show in Electronic Imaging at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee and wonders why Scotland is not quite 'Halfway To Paradise' when it comes to the media.

Trying to locate Dundee on a cultural map of Scotland becomes a real misnomer if considered in terms of the cultural power base of the Scot's nation generally and places in the 'north' where it's meant to be all happening- but for the record:

It's 480 miles closer to the North Pole than London, a mere 80 miles from Glasgow (the Euro Culture centre) and the 'kingdom' of Fife (beaches, disappearing coal-mining communities and first-strike air bases) is the only thing that stands between it and Edinburgh (the possible home of Channel Five).

Having located it on a map and mastered the name 'Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art' (DJCA for short) and considered the term 'Electronic Imaging' arguments then begin to rage about whether such places are attempting to produce 'mainstream' programme makers or are simply fostering a 'marginalized' experimental approach, out of touch with the needs of the 'industry' and of little interest to a reactionary and insular art world.

Geography, Calvinism and vested interests aside the work itself provided an antidote to any such criticisms and should any erstwhile adventurer or 'lost legion' have managed to find Dundee, then they may have been pleasantly surprised by what greeted their tired, travel weary and all too cynical senses.

The scope of work on show this year ranged from a number of worthy, relevant and crafted documentaries, through to the inevitable stings, computer graphics, pop promo's and (dare I define it as such?) 'Artist's Video'. Irrespective of how 'arty' or how many effects buttons were or weren't pushed the tapes reflected the energy and vibrancy of the 'Class of 89', further contributing to the debate on the shifting ground between Art, Television and Image Making.

Experimentation, yes- but in all cases it was apparent that the students knew what they were doing. . . .

Convenient though it is to 'pigeonhole' students many of those who attend such courses as the Jordanstone 'Electronic Imaging'

curriculum as effective operators/button

pushers are classified, at best, within the catch-all category of 'designers', and at worst marginalized as 'video artist's' the real potential at DJCA appears to lie in the emergence of future programme makers alongside an awareness of resources and a 'sensibility' evident in what they may end up producing.

For the first time this year strong documentary work stood out- in particular the work of Jim Adamson with an extract from the 60 minute 'Making The Break', an engaging and well crafted production- the maker having produced a work which acted not only as a relevant statement on an often forgotten group in our world of equal opportunities and 'positive' action but also gave voice to a group who, through spinal injury or similar disability, have found themselves confined to life in a wheel chair. The extract shown was both a remarkable record of the spirit and desire to overcome disability by those in front of the camera and an achievement on the part of Adamson, who is himself disabled.

Of the other 'docs on the box' many provided students with the opportunity to work on relevant subjects/issues in a direct way with students from other areas of activity prepared to be involved and lend their skills. This provided an opening for many worthy causes and silent minorities who haven't the capital to produce such projects commercially to make tapes and produced evidence that even makers of the most complex of images can occasionally 'play- it straight' (contrary to widely held opinion).

The Graphic/Animation leaning of the course continues to flourish with the work of Jamie Russell standing out as being witty, stylish and accomplished. His 'A Simple Sensibility' proving that not all graphics/animation needs a beat-box sound track driving twenty five different images per second. Potential designers need not all necessarily spend their time producing mock 'Swatch' or 'Mates' ads if they want to get a job at the glossy end of things. . . .

(Russell's other work's included sequences in the forthcoming Variant Video and the title material for the 'Made In Scotland II' compilation).

Most of the works produced this year, however, appeared to occupy the greyscale somewhere between the more 'graphic' of artist's video and the more 'original' areas of

televisual design.

The work of Russell and Sara Downes- he is now with London's

'Complete Video' company while she is with 'Scope' of Glasgow- are particularly good examples of how a lot of complex hardware can be used to produce short, succinct and often sensitive pieces.

These works prove that too many 'toys' aren't necessarily a bad thing- provided they are in the hands of the right 'boys' and 'girls' hand's.

Top of the form this year (Gold Star and a probable black listing) was the former painter John Butler. His witty, revealing and subversive tape 'World Peace Through Free Trade' showed that computer graphics and technology can be an incredibly powerful tool for comment. Taking as it's form a 'classic' multi-national Corporate Video (flying logo's et al) the piece promoted a fictionalized and sinister corporation called 'Globex'. It's message ringing true through it's style (at times a bit too close to the real thing for comfort) 'World Peace' offered a clever- clever prophesy on the state of things to come in the U. K Incorporated.

Other work which effectively brought together technologies in new ways ('convergent approaches' as the course founder might call them) included the crafted live action/computer animation works of Cavin Convery (graduating in Sculpture of all things) and the shorts and promo's of Andrews- Smith, Whiteford and Macgregor.

In all of these works, the amount of thought and 'grit' was self-evident, a key factor often being their 'accessibility' with many serious, sensitive and provocative issues under consideration along with an awareness, and at times mastery, of video technology.

My only criticism of such works is that they were often all too short and that I ended up feeling a bit cheated when unable to enjoy more of the quality and clarity of the imagery on show. (This brevity is possibly due to a problem in the course itself. There is a requirement that each student produce at least three 'individual works'. Alternatively the shortness of the work made may be a symptom of this decades of 'three minute culture', if one wants to be profound).

The areas vaguely defined (marginalized?) as 'artist's video' included the vox-pop of Ian Elliot's 'RGB' and 'Total Resistance' which did,

in contrast to the works mentioned above and in common with many video artist's tapes, need to be shorter. The strong message and sledge-hammer style of Elliot's tape were lost in the work's wandering duration (is class war really that dull?). Similarly Malcolm Dickson's piece, 'Stone', which was originally designed as an element in an installation, needed more consideration in its presentation to the 'sit-down' viewer.

Again, duration and timing became the key factors while 'As The Crow Flies', which effectively used old Super-8 footage in a 'Las Of Scotland' fashion to capture a view of a world fast disappearing (an ex-mining community) was all too short.

Other tapes falling into the 'video art/ unclassifiable/experimental but- we- know- what- we- are- doing' camp ranged from a series of shorts by Jak Milroy (including the video-music pieces 'Musi-hands' and 'Gibberish', the latter a sideswipe at how most of the English think the Scots speak) to tapes by Justine Bretton and video poems by Gareth Roberts and Guy Carpenter which all effectively tried to bring poetry and narrative to the fore.

A further tape which caught a different mood and brought another dimension to the programme was Steve Smart's 'Burnside', a contemplative work combining dance and mime with images of a charmed part of the

Scottish countryside. (Something other than computer graphics, gizmo's, whizz bangs and impending apocalypse is on view in Smart's tapes).

Finally, a project still in progress and which may effectively bring together many of the 'convergent approaches' outlined above is 'Variant' magazine's next edition- a video and audio-cassette 'special'- which will encompass material ranging from interviews with internationally recognised tapemakers through to poetry readings, computer animation, music video and the recollections of ageing "Red Clydesiders" reflecting on a world fast fading in the Thatcherite eighties.

It has been said- somewhat unfairly- by many commercially minded producers that video artist's work too slowly or push resources too far. The strength of the work produced at Dundee lies in the fact that it does push resources and that many of the students working in this area do so with the same urgency as their erstwhile colleagues in the 'industry' and often with a greater awareness of 'production values' than many of their critics.

Equally, this mixed environment seems to be having an effect on 'designers', programme makers and potential writing talent which, sadly, has yet to trickle through to the Scottish film and video industry (let alone the art world). Furthermore the ability of these

tapemakers to work on both simple and straight forward documentaries and more complex visual pieces must surely indicate the advanced nature of the vocabulary currently being developed and reflect badly on the one-dimensional nature of much of the criticism levelled.

It's frustrating to think that bigotry and the eject button are only pushed when the word 'artist' is mentioned and that within the confines of Scotland many of those who leave courses like Dundee's find themselves unable to either find the funds for future productions or are told to come back when they've got a 'track record' by an unresponsive industry still hung up on the Grierson tradition. The other alternative is to head south to the facilities, gadgets and gizmos, or more realistically, building sites, squats and LVA's of London.

Beyond such courses as the one at DJCA there remains a desperate need to raise awareness (more through the training of programme makers than operators). What's called for is the encouragement of a dialogue or debate which includes (rather than polarises) the new generation of tape and film-makers now emerging and which involves everyone from artists to documentary makers, academics to workshop co-ordinators and mainstream producers to funding agencies.

For all of us here there is a need to stop looking longingly to the south and for the media/cultural industries in particular to stop pretending that places like Dundee don't exist and to start looking at the haggard and hard working graduates, neglected programme makers and artists who are surfacing from places like Duncan of Jordanstone. Home grown talent that is just as likely to head out of Scotland on the first Inter-City 125 as it is to stay in a context which seems empty of opportunity and encouragement.

'Blowing In The Wind' by Zan Elliott



'Flueshot' by Jamie Russell

PROTECT AND



SURVIVE