

NOT JUST WHAT YOU SAY: ALSO THE WAY YOU SAY IT

Recent directions in community/documentary video - 18/9/85 Screening

At its birth about 15 years ago community/oppositional video inherited the documentary tradition. (It's interesting that the acknowledged instigator of the tradition, Grierson, was also involved in creating the National Film Board of Canada, whose Challenge for Change programme was itself a shaping influence on the early use of portable video). So although community tapes were made by, with, or under the editorial control of the groups who were their subject - Tenants, young people, campaigns etc. - the forms in which they were made tended to follow that of the 'documentary about social problems', now a staple genre on broadcast T.V..

Over the last few years this has begun to change, largely, in my view, because of the theoretical and practical work around the notion of representation done most notably by black and feminist groups. We now recognise more clearly that 'representing' ourselves is not just a question of having access to the equipment to make tapes, but also entails subverting the existing forms in which we have been represented, and/or developing new ones.

The four tapes being shown this evening each in their own way reflect, and contribute to, these changes. We hope their makers will be present at the screening to answer questions.

*Tomy Dowmont.*

1) WHO KILLED COLIN ROACH Isaac Julien 1983 35 mins.

« Documentary.

The bombardment of documentary in the press and on television was colossal, but concentrated only on the sensationalist aspects of the campaign, continually obscuring the family's demands. Phone calls were made to me demanding footage of arrests, fights, violence - predictable news material. The documentation of the dominant media always used a voice over to tell us the 'facts': a white middle-class observer informing us from an objective standpoint, speaking over Mr and Mrs Roach. This is why I did not adopt the conventional voice-over.

It was a debatable question. I was confronted by the Roach Family Support Committee about it, and I replied that I didn't think I was in a position to use one, or have the authority to.

The RFSC, used to the techniques of mainstream television, did not trust my approach. I had to work hard to develop a relationship with Mr and Mrs Roach, an important part of my liason with the RFSC. I was the 'man with the movie camera', and so in a position of power: it was delicate process.

The Role of black film-makers.

In the name of white professionalism standards are set up. Do black film-makers have to adopt/copy these techniques? I do not believe that what we decode from the news as objective information, presented as the 'truth', is that at all. Documentary relies on the notion of objectivity, when it really presents the white middle-class point of view. In the Roach affair this bias was evident. My tape is an attempt to undermine the dominant and official 'reconstruction' of events, and to produce an alternative version in which black people speak for themselves. >>

2) WORKERS OR SHIRKERS Pimlico Arts and Media Scheme 1985 15 mins.

« The starting point for the production 'WORKERS OR SHIRKERS' was to make a film on unemployment with a group of unemployed people. The group discussed the notion of the documentary film, and looked at the way TV treated social issues, focussing particularly on the emage of the individual as a 'victim' (of poverty, unemployment, bad education etc) represented by a close-up talking head mouthing stereotyped phrases. The group felt that they made no attempt to present people as individuals with anything worthwhile to say, merely as 'realistic' support material for the editorial content of the film. In addition, we felt that the notion of unemployment as a problem best represented by statistics (3½ million out of work, one in five in certain areas, endless percentage breakdowns etc) did not help the viewer to relate to the issue, and neither did the depiction of the problem of living on £25 per week generate anything more than pity for the individuals shown. So we set out to contrast this representation with one of our own. This also meant re-evaluating the notion of 'unemployment as an issue'; consequently, we replaced 'unemployment' with 'attitudes to work' and identified three types. These were the disillusioned job-seeker, misled by govt. promises of life after YTS; the worker in a menial job; and the 'alternative unemployed', who more or less chooses not to be permanently employed.

The last type roughly described the workshop participants; the production process gave them an interesting way of critically confronting their own attitudes. »

Krishan Arora - Workshop  
Coordinator

3) WHOSE LAW? South Wales Miners Project 1985 20 mins.

**Whose Law?** is a campaign video produced by South Wales Miners Video Project. It is intended to fuel the campaign for those victimised after the miners strike and mobilise the wider trade union movement against the threat to organised workers protest.

This video is an excellent account of the use of the criminal law against the miners. It also articulates concisely the arguments around victimisation, sacking and imprisonment. It could be criticised for its lack of underlying analysis and its failure to explain why the criminal law had been used in the way that it has. Many NUM members, other trade unionists and support workers know now, to their cost, the details of the police and judicial assault upon the miners. What many people lack is an overall political analysis of the state which will take them forward at this time.

Having made this criticism, it is important to say that this shortfalling is compensated for by the professionalism of the tape and the innovative use of video. Though the film is only twenty minutes long and has been produced under pressure of time, parts of it are powerful enough to leave a lasting impression. The film montage effect used throughout, and the colour wash, harden the sense of confrontation between the workers and the state. The use of a broken image of computer print out for charges and sentences make a serious point, effectively, about the police use of technology. The music which accompanies the film by Brian Eno is particularly powerful; static distorted electronic chant, a jittery and partially unheard media dialogue provides a good

background to the clear statements made by trade unionists, arrested people and ex-prisoners.

From a review of the tape in LIBERATOR - the paper of the National Organisation of Miners in Prison and Supporters.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY/Ms. Takin' Identity. Albany Video 1985. 25 mins.

At a recent talk I gave to over 50 young people who were on a MSC scheme, I asked if any of them had seen the 'youth' programme 16 Up or Something Else; about 4 people raised their hands.. The common ground I thought we all would have shared was not to be. The programmes which proved most popular with them were Brookside and The Tube, drama and music programmes. For those who work with young people this will come as no surprise, for those who make tapes about and with young people, it will.

As video makers who are aiming our products at communities of interest we are very often removed from the consumption stage of our work; to produce is all. Consequently, (not always deliberately) we are so concerned with the soundness of our argument, we forget to think about how it looks, choose to ignore form for ideological reasons, or just forget that at the end of the production we want people to sit and watch what we have produced. Perhaps a few years ago I would have used one or all of the above to explain the lack of visual pleasure in products I produced or was showing to groups I was working with, but now I have sat through too many screenings (especially with young people) where people watch the screen with their eyes closed, or discussion time has solely been taken up with answering endless questions about why it looked the way it did.

It is because of this, and the desire to do drama work with young women that MISTAKEN IDENTITY/Ms. TAKIN IDENTITY takes the form it does, a very direct and conscious presentation of work written and performed by young women between the ages of 13 and 21. All the participating groups are involved in the production of different kinds of arts activities with young women. The nine pieces which make up the tape consist of different bits of drama, animation, music and film work. Each piece has been adapted using a range of television genres such as ads, pop videos, soap operas etc.....it's interesting that all through the production and pre production stages, none of the young women mentioned a talking head or an interview format once; perhaps they're trying to tell us something.

Karen Alexander.