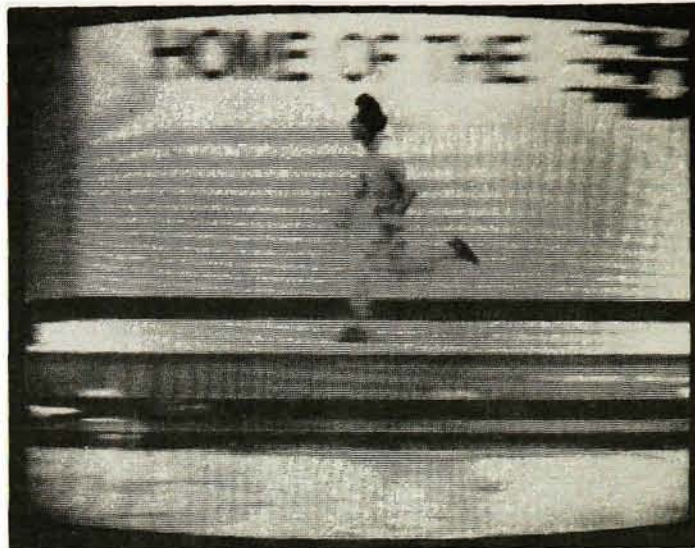


"Habits" by YYZ, Toronto



No Voice Over



Henry Kissinger Won the Nobel Prize



Moscow Does Not Believe in Queers



Chinese Characters

INVITATION TO A SCREENING

What could five tapes, varying in length from 12 to 27 minutes, and dealing with the subjects of reality, scatological taboo, warfare, gay life in Moscow, and sexual stereotyping have in common? Clearly, controversy.

But *Habits*, a recent screening of five videos sponsored by YYZ, a Toronto-based artist's centre, is more deeply unified than might appear at first place. The tapes, produced by Toronto-area artists who have worked closely together in the past, are characterized by their criticism of society, including attacks on social injustice, repression, alienation, and stereotyping. In short, they reflect both a gay sensibility, which can be defined as a heightened awareness of society's shortcomings, and a camp aestheticism, of which crucial aspects are the movement away from conventional concerns to the more unusual and an opposition to narrowly defined morality.

There are strong lines of protest in these tapes, political statements demanding attention and respect for their subject matter. Unfortunately, at times the tapes show more con-

cern for the message than the formalities of the medium. Static imagery is a common problem, but on the whole, these tapes are worthwhile precisely because of their provocative nature.

Henry Kissinger won the Nobel Peace Prize, which, incidentally, is only a title tangential to its content, is a humorous commentary about social taboo through its treatment of the scatological. As a word and as a concept, shit has many uses and associations. Here artist Gary Kibbins takes this socially unacceptable topic and puts it in the classroom, creating an appropriate environment for ironic humour, which the tape tactfully and successfully exploits. Yet beneath the veneer of absurdity lies an acerbic commentary about the dangers of social taboos and the repression of the individual in general.

There is almost no structure or narrative development in this video. Instead, Mr. Hockey, a misfit clad in only a jock-strap and helmet, answers questions about shit, and tests his three students on their knowledge. At one point, Mr. Hockey asks

the boys to sign documents stating "that you agree in principle that the body produces shit." This comment, and Mr. Hockey's attire, attest to his minority status, and the fact that no documents are signed underscores the social unacceptability of this kind of debate.

Many elements of the tape strengthen its humour. The four principals act like juveniles. The students get bored and ask Mr. Hockey to tell them a story. Mr. Hockey complements his outfit with ludicrous facial expressions captured in close-up. The soundtrack music, from a children's TV show, matches the mood perfectly. Finally, a laugh-track periodically adds to the absurdity of the tape which, perhaps more importantly, attempts to tell the viewing audience and the principals what is funny, reminding us that the social dictates work and so delineates our thought-processes.

As Mr. Hockey elucidates, "There are so many social taboos that you suffocate the life out of the body. Society is built on the repression of the body." The reference to sexual repression is unmistakable, and the sex-

ual associations of shit are made obvious. Indeed, in this tape, shit is a metaphor for both sex, the life-giving drive, and death. At one point Mr. Hockey hands the students a reward: long brown cigars which, according to one student, "taste like shit," but are symbolically labelled 'Mr. Big'. Shit is also associated with death: "If you censor life out of the body, all you have left is shit," says Mr. Hockey.

But the boys, like society at large, are unwilling to challenge societal repression. They attack and silence their potential liberator, leaving him, apparently dead, with a 'Mr. Big' sticking grotesquely out of his mouth. In an unduly prolonged sequence, they run down stairways, around indoor tracks and pools, but are unable to escape. They, like us, must face the truth of death.

Qu'est ce qu'un homme peut faire? was originally a theatrical production Shown across Canada. It is a criticism of aggression and social injustice, from warfare to domestic violence.

Most of the action takes place on a stage containing two rows of paper bags reminiscent of gravestones and upon which are written the words, 'There's No Place Like Home' and 'Warfare v. Welfare.' The words point to director Clive Robertson's passionate concern with violence in the home, and social injustice perpetrated by the rich on the poor. During the course of the tape, action focusses on a solitary, unspeaking actor (Robertson) who performs symbolic activities in conjunction with commentary taken from articles in such magazines as *Time*, *Centerfold*, and *Fireweed*. In one instance, when the narrator is reading an excerpt on war, Robertson plays with a toy jet-fighter. When the commentary turns to violence against children, he painfully tries to stack lettered building blocks. He crawls on his belly pushing a glass of wine with his outstretched hand, to the sound of exploding bombs. His actions are meant to mirror our own lives, with their facades of joy and laughter behind which is contained much misery. The fact that Robertson is always on stage alone points to our own isolation from each other.

The tape, then, is a cold attack on society, criticising social acceptance of domestic violence, and angrily asserting that it's the "Patriarchy versus everyone else." The tape also calls for change, taking a suggestion from *Centerfold* that the causes of (the Vietnam) war are to be sought elsewhere, "instead of proscribing cinematic enemas like *Apocalypse Now* or *The Deer Hunter*." Yet in response to his own call for action, Robertson sings at the end of the tape, "What can a man say?" and suggests that we "take a look around, there are better stories being told...by women."

The formal elements work to strengthen the sombre tone of the video, but they are not cinematic. Visually, colours are restricted to dark shades and whites. The principal wears a black-leather jacket, the set's backdrop is dark, and the paper bags are a melancholy brown. The sound effects (the beating of drums or the screams of people on a roller-coaster) give the tape an urgent, painful feel. But the question begs to be asked: why was the production taped at all? Aside from the brief shot of the front of a church, and a few shots of Toronto streets, all the action takes place on stage. One of the strengths of this production is its communication of Robertson's personal pain and suffering. But much of the theatrical intimacy is lost through taping. The trade-off between intimacy and image manipulation by the camera (zooms, close-ups) is not worth it.

tory of Soviet policy towards homosexuality. On a more personal level, it reflects the experiences of the director during his trip to Moscow. These concerns would be extremely interesting and could form the basis of a fine tape - except that Greyson provides few images relating to them. Obviously, a fundamental problem, and Greyson's attempts to solve it results in the introduction of too many images that are not personal, and an over-reliance on verbal communication. The result is a somewhat uninspired, disunited tape.

Greyson grounds his discussion of Soviet homosexuality and his perception of the festival in a fictitious rendez-vous between two men who have gotten together for casual sex. One of the men is the delegate to the festival, while the other one wants to hear about "those hunky Red Guards." This, then, is the supporting skeleton, the reference around which festival images and other images are hung. But the skeleton is frail. The acting of the two men is stilted and static, (the men lie in bed in an assortment of positions, and at one point joust with super-hero toys.) The account of the festival and associated events are verbally conveyed. There are some supporting images, but these often fail to capture the energy of the experience. Still pictures of the closing ceremonies taken from afar, and split-screen images of a bottle of Sunlight liquid next to a Soviet park are not substantial reflections of what the tape is trying to be about.

The historical roots of homosexuality are also verbalized with a dearth of complementing images. In an effort to solve this limitation, Greyson throws in excerpts from early Soviet cinema, and invents a modern-day interview with one of Lenin's original colleagues, Alexandra Kollontai, a proponent of emancipatory sexual politics.

Greyson also includes long, ironic segments taken from the Rock Hudson movie, *Ice Station Zebra*. During the festival, the Western press revealed that Hudson had contracted AIDS, and media fascination with this item is exploited as images of newspaper headlines shouting "I killed Rock Hudson" are intercut with the main body of the tape.

Ultimately a very personal video mirroring the thoughts and concerns of the director during a short segment of his life, *Moscow Does Not Believe in Queers* is cluttered with weak images, movie excerpts, and fabricated interviews. Greyson tries to give the video more cohesion by tightening it up with quick editing, up-beat musical interludes, and image manipulations such as wipes and split-screen effects. But these attempts to give the tape a slick appearance and faster pace by technical manipulation, only succeed in further distancing the director from his work.

Richard Fung is another artist, who, in his latest tape takes issue with so-

cial conditioning and its manipulative power. *Chinese Characters* is the author's look into his own sexual development in conjunction with restricting socializing factors. Maintaining old identity standards to which you cannot conform leads to anxiety and ambivalence about the self. This inner tension is effectively conveyed in the tape through the passive/active dichotomy of the images. The passive images correspond to Fung's past, an unquestioning approach to the world and an acceptance of the canons of normative society, while the active images reflect the turbulence of the present, Fung's rejection of social restraint.

Fung's search for sexual identity is symbolized on the tape by the enactment of a Chinese parable about a man in search of the source of the Yellow River. Before he embarks on his journey, the adventurer cannot decide on the appropriate outfit, and changes his clothing numerous times. The sequence is quickened by jump-cuts, and the same technique is used to distinguish the traveller's rapid change of footwear in the early stages of the journey. The images suggest an initial ambivalence to the quest for sexual identity, followed by accelerated intellectual posturing. Towards the end of the tape, the adventurer finds the answer to his quest, as a court astronomer directs his gaze to the Milky Way, revealing it as the source of the Yellow River. The plethora of stars comprising the Milky Way seem to suggest a destination of a multitude of choices, of freedom sexual and personal.

No Voice Over offers us an existential view of the world where action is difficult because everything is indefinite and in a state of constant change. Reality is a fluid concept different from one minute to the next, and is also subjective, differing from person to person. Because of this, real communication is impossible. Despite all our efforts, to a large extent we are isolated from each other.

Director Colin Campbell deliberately structures the tape loosely. Effectively, there is no real beginning or end; nothing gets done, and nothing is stable. Moca, one of the main characters, buys a postcard of a mummy, which turns out to be a mummified hawk. This apparently trivial revelation, in conjunction with her mother's recent demise, leads her to abandon her painting and her work with a journal, and head off to South America to practice archeology (because you can reach yourself by "tangibly touching the past"). Meanwhile, her best friend and sometimes lover, Miranda, takes off for Italy. Upon arrival she receives a letter-tape from Moca, and becomes so obsessed with the contents that she cannot write the script she was going to do. The video ends with Miranda missing a plane to Japan, the place of her next assignment.

Because of the indeterminacy of reality, our physical and mental isolation is evidenced through the use

of the letter-tapes sent by the various characters. The tapes are conceptualized twice, once when composed and once when listened to. Because words are limited and their interpretation depends on many factors, the intended message will never be exactly the same as the one received. The difficulty of communication is emphasized in the video by the problem Moca and Miranda have relating. As the women have a warm relationship effectively communicated on the tape, the problem is noticeable. Moca supposes she sees Miranda in South Africa, and believes the apparition may somehow be real. When she tries to describe the aura around Miranda's face, however, she cannot do it. "Not exactly a halo," she stammers, "more like a fire...I don't know. I thought you were in danger...I don't know."

But film language at once make communication possible by allowing us a common code yet at the same time limits the filmmaker's versatility in his communication. In this tape, Campbell oversteps the rules to make us aware of them, and to allow himself more freedom. For instance, when Miranda sends out some script ideas, the concepts in her mind are reflected on the screen. She talks about the Goodyear Blimp, and we see it. Then she says, "On the other hand, I'm losing faith in this idea," and the image disappears.

Campbell manages to give reality to the mind's eye because he doesn't believe in a unifying objective reality.

Phil van Steenburgh •

HENRY KISSINGER WON THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

d. Gary Kibbins
With: Jeremy Forde, Dominic Cuzzocrea, Kim Tomczak, Chris Reed, Pierro Zambotti
Technical: John Greyson, Elizabeth Schroder
running time, 12 min.

QUEST CE QU'UN HOMME PEUT FAIRE?

d. Clive Robertson
Narration: Janet Martin, Clive Robertson, Carole Conde, Joyce Mason, Lisa Wyndels, Lisa Steele
Technical: Yvonne Dignard
Music Mix: Michael Wojewoda
Musicians: Wadi, Janet Martin, Ian Colvin, Clive Robertson
running time, 15 min.

MOSCOW DOES NOT BELIEVE IN QUEERS

d. John Greyson
With: Michael Balsler, Colin Campbell, Louise Garfield, Duncan Keir, Pat Wilson
Technical: Colin Campbell, Gary Kibbins
running time, 27 min.

CHINESE CHARACTERS

d. Richard Fung
With: Lloyd Wong, Lim, Paul Cheung
Technical: John Greyson
Music: Glenn Schellenberg
running time, 15 min.

NO VOICE OVER

d. Colin Campbell
With: Doug Durand, Michel Feher, Bruce Ferguson, John Greyson, Johanna Householder, Duncan Keir, Kerri Kwinter, Ramona Naddass, Leena Raudvee, Janice Williamson
running time, 27 min.

DISTRIBUTOR:

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Conceived from his trip to Moscow as a gay delegate for the World Festival of Youth and Students, John Greyson's *Moscow Does Not Believe in Queers*, attempts to explore Soviet gay life and the his-