

Hybrid TV: Feature-length video

BY MARK O'NEILL

Just what is the difference between a feature-length film and a feature-length video (FLV)? It's a question that came up several times during FLV-MC-MLXXXVIII, a four-day festival presented by Vancouver's *Video In* in September. Eight long videos, from 70 to 95 minutes, were selected by curators Paul Wong and Karen Knights. They varied greatly in style, subject matter, 'narrative' technique and purpose but, collectively, there was a qualitative difference from any eight experimental films that might have been assembled for a celluloid festival.

Before exploring that question, it's worth noting the second theme that ran through the screenings, informal discussions and closing colloquium: what some see as the inevitable melding of the two media. Is FLV "electronic film or electronic revolution"? Is it simply a cheap imitation of film or does it have potential to be more? Will a technical collision, via new systems like High Definition Television (HDTV), inevitably result in a end to any differences?

A brief synopsis of the eight videos screened at the festival will provide some context for the debate that followed:

New York-Batavia, by Rien Hagen of The Netherlands, is a production that would appear right at home on PBS. Based on real letters written between a Dutch civil servant posted to the East Indies in the final days of colonial rule and his wife in New York, it is both richly and creatively photographed. We never see their faces but, through use of both archival footage and well-matched reconstructions, become intimately acquainted with both his growing distress about the political situation and her loneliness, even while enjoying the entertainments of the Big Apple. It's worth noting that *New York-Batavia* won the Grand Prize at the 1987 Dutch Film Awards.

It was followed on opening night by an uneven Los Angeles entry, *Green Card: An American Romance* by Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, self-described media critics. Again it's based on a true story, that of a Japanese woman, Sumie, who marries for immigration reasons. The video attempts to use the conventions of soap opera to criticize the American Dream Susie is chasing. However it's wise to be adept at a form, particularly one as well-known as the soap, before satirizing it. *Green Card* seemed to provoke laughter not because of the points it made but because of the often clumsy way it made them.

The first Canadian video was *Playing With Fire* by Marusia Bociurkiw. In it a woman loses all memories of sexuality and all notions of what might be obscene. While under observation by concerned authorities she meets a female social worker who's fed up with men. They become friends, roommates and lovers. In telling the story Bociurkiw, well-known for her feminist work, examines issues of state censorship and surveillance while questioning basic societal assumptions about heterosexuality.

It was followed by Ira Cirker's *Gertrude Stein and A Companion*, an 87-minute video which has made it onto U.S. pay television. Jan Miner (Palmolive's Madge) plays Stein who we first see as a ghost. The production jumps back and forth in time covering questions of genius, art and Stein's longstanding relationship with Alice B. Toklas.

Then, from the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop, the longest video (95 minutes), *Out of Order*. Both inventive and entertaining, it tells, in modified form, the stories of the teenagers who wrote and produced it. They're urban kids facing a pointless future as Margaret Thatcher's policies isolate wealth and jobs in the south of England. Anthony, fed up with the dole, decides to train as a policeman to the disgust of his girlfriend. Billy, a misfit in any age, has a fascination with telephones and, by the end of the video, is in deep trouble, having figured out how to telepathically ring up no less a personage than the Home Secretary. *Out of Order* provided what must have been an unsettling opportunity for Britain's Channel 4 viewers to see the world through the eyes of kids with funny haircuts.

Tristesse Modèle Réduit by Quebec's Robert Morin deals with another of the disadvantaged, Jeannot, a mentally handicapped 25-year-old. He lives in suburban splendour complete with swimming pool, loving parents and the services of a new maid. It's she, Pauline, who provokes the story in challenging the parents' over-protection of their son. Jeannot plays himself and also narrates, often addressing the camera directly as he begins a new life of independence.

Norman Cohn's *Quartet for Deafblind* is the most difficult video to watch. Rather than a 25-year-old Downs-Syndrome adult with unplumbed capacity for self-reliance, it follows through the day of an institutionalized child with multiple handicaps. We see him with nose literally glued to a TV screen while attendants struggle with the morning routine of tooth-brushing, his daily routine of school and swimming pool and, exhausted by the



experience, witness his fascination with a dripping tap during his nightly bath. Cohn, a Canadian videomaker, uses the harsh tones of video recording and cacophonous sound to approximate the out-of-focus reality of a child with minimal hearing and sight. He shot perhaps hundreds of hours of tape in order to assemble 86 minutes in the day of a perplexed little boy.

The final FLV was *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* by American Bill Viola. Completely free of narrative line, it's a painting, or series of paintings, on video beginning with what appear to be shots of rocks in a cave. Eventually the camera moves back and the cave is revealed as the rotting corpse of a dead buffalo. Viola seems to slow time down as he tracks a gathering thunderstorm and then speeds it up in a strobed involving barking attack dogs. Nothing Viola shoots is out of the ordinary but his brilliant in-camera editing forces nonstop questioning of assumptions about what we see everyday.

"A feature-length video is about 90 minutes," says co-curator Paul Wong, "your usual entertainment outing. Normally when you go to

an experimental video screening you're sitting down to an hour, or hour and a half, of maybe 10 tapes. That's a lot of ideas, good, bad and indifferent. You walk about oversaturated.

"I think the '80s has been the era of the rock video with a three-minute storyline. I'm enthusiastic about these longer works; they provide deeper ideas and involve a more imaginative sense of time.

"In some ways it can be used as cheap film. There's work like Norman Cohn's (*Quartet*) who's in the institution just holding the camera and observing. It's not quite a documentary, it's not a document and it's not a narrative; it's true to something that only video can do because you couldn't afford to shoot hours and hours of film. Video allows the maker to just hang-out."

His collaborator in putting together the FLV festival, Karen Knights, quotes videomaker Martha Rosler who describes video art as standing at the crossroads of fine art and mass culture.

"She argues that if video artists begin to seek out a more general audience, then their concerns must change to meet it. That change will carry all the consequences of loss of unassimilated marginality. Familiarity breeds, if not contempt exactly, then a diminished ability to interrupt mass mythologies."

Most of the eight productions screened at FLV seem to question that assumption and, in fact, seem to suggest that broadcast or exhibition of video can strengthen the power of the interruption. Jonnie Turpie, the adult responsible for *Out of Order*, says video art can't, and perhaps shouldn't, hide from the omnipresence of broadcast television.

"Everyone who watches video has TV in their minds, it's the box they're watching it on. We (the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop), having made a number of documentaries, asked ourselves 'Is this what we'd watch on TV?' 'Well, if we knew about it we might but what we would watch are soap operas and movies.' That encouraged us to think about making drama and comedy and something approaching a feature (film).

"Clearly there are problems with this position. The minute you start talking with TV companies and feature distributors, you end up wondering if you're compromising your ideas. What we're trying to do is make popular politics. As an artist one can deal with any subject you like but the audience is fellow artists. But when the audience is a general one with a variety of references, usually not

including video art, you must consider how to communicate, not simply how to express your ideas and views."

The Birmingham Workshop has a level of control that likely confounds any TV executive who'd like to tell them what not to do. Because of Channel 4's mandate to "be innovative and serve minorities" the kids who write, perform, direct and produce videos have collective editorial control.

And there lies the beginning of an answer to the differences between FLV and feature films. All of the videos that dealt with real stories allowed, officially or otherwise, the real people to tell their tales. *New York-Batavia* remained true to the letters written, *Tristesse Modèle Réduit* put Jeannot squarely in front of the camera and *Quartet for Deafblind* was totally driven by the random activities of the handicapped youngster. Interestingly, *Green Card*, while ostensibly Sumie's story, seemed to get derailed by the intervention of script.

Videomakers, in marked contrast to feature film writers and directors, seem on the whole to be committed to collaboration with their subjects. They talk about most film as being market-driven while describing their own work as audience-driven. The "market" is someone's guess about what will sell and sell big. The audience, in video terms, need not be extensive. Norman Cohn wonders where the notions of process and community fit into tapemaking.

"The issue is that... of display. It requires being freed from other people's labels; the assumption that the way to be seen is on TV. Or in cinemas; there's no reason to believe a cinema is an appropriate place to see a video which is not a film.

"It's a medium heavily informed by privacy. One of video's qualities is the formation of a community. Audiences may well be private and restricted. You need not be suckered into assuming that validation is quantitative."

"To me there are two critical issues in working in long form: One... puts the burden on the maker in the sense of asking people to give more of their time and attention. There's a much stronger requirement for mastery of the medium so that it is explored as fully as possible. How do I make an 88-minute tape well enough so that people don't get up and leave?

"The phrase Feature Length Video is an oxymoron. Feature is a film term... and even within film it's sort of a meaningless term except from a marketing point of view. I prefer the French references which come out in English as a 'long thing' or a 'short thing'... I'm prepared to say I make long tapes."

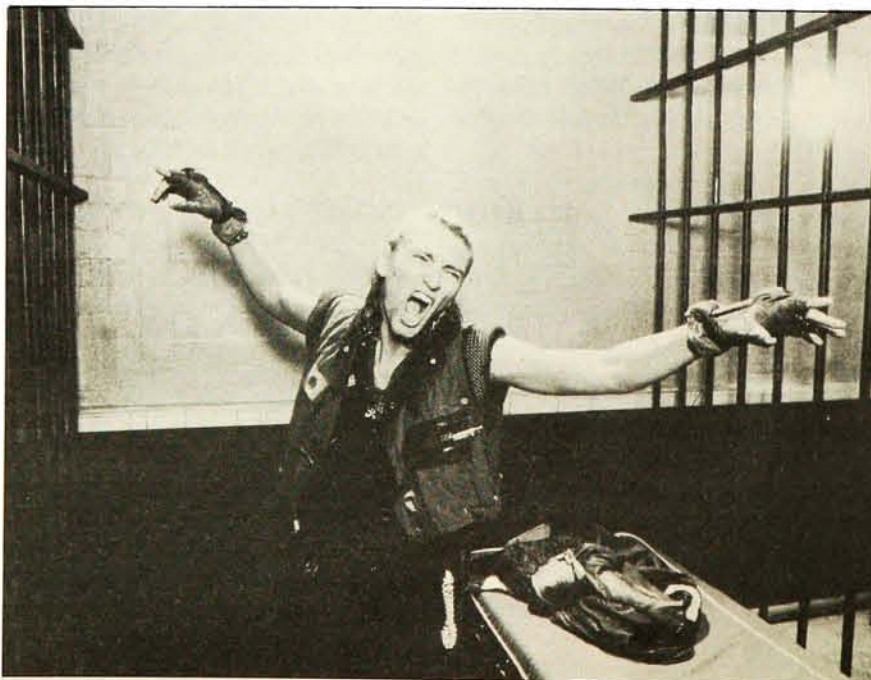
Whatever the result of that argument, it may soon be a moot point. Filmmakers have long been using video to set-up and test shots, the technology for converting one to the other improves in leaps and bounds and television screens of the not-too-distant future will be at least as big as what can be found at the



Gertrude Stein and A Companion



Maureen White and Janine Fuller in *Playing With Time*



British production *Out of Order*, by Jonnie Turpie

neighborhood Cineplex. FLV proudly announced that all its screenings would be on state-of-the-art equipment which turned out to be the kind of rear-projection system found in any decent sports tavern. Cohn was not impressed and, at first, was going to insist his tape be shown only on standard monitors.

"The tape played on the (large) screen with exactly the contradiction I expected. The size... is definitely an advantage. But the disadvantage, which speaks right to the difference between film and video, is that my tape is very much about the quality of light. Because I'm a video-maker it's about electronic light, not optical light. The tape is about a deafblind child who *eats* light rather than sees it; I think the qualities of electronic light are central to the notion of the tape.

"I make video for an electron-beamed display and so I think about composition and the qualities of light and contrast and the vulgarity of the image that are inherent. I try to use those things as strengths rather than as weaknesses; they become weaknesses in a film-like display."

As is often the case at events such as FLV there was agreement to disagree. Some videomakers will choose to stick to the medium as experienced on a traditional television set while others are eagerly anticipating the advent of viable, clear, crisp theatre-sized screens. All of the eight 'producers' present are nervous about television broadcasting philosophies (or lack of same) but seem comfortable with the technology of transmission.

The conference ended with no clear definition of the differences but an underlying conviction that they exist. Perhaps it's the overall absence of traditional screen 'writing' in the process; the general conviction that stories can be told by the first-person participants without the intervention of a professional wordsmith. Certainly there were enough examples of just that at FLV to back up the argument.

As well, there's a portability and immediacy to video that's difficult to achieve in film, even in *cinéma vérité*. Although the videomakers tend to discredit mainstream television, it may be that much-maligned medium which has provided the basis for their provocative, believable tapes. Nearly four decades of the stuff have educated audiences to understand and interpret video images. Film remains a special event, something we expect to remove us from the grit and grime of everyday life. Video, with its harsh colours and pointillist distortions, is somehow real. For video artists committed to subject-driven story-telling, it reinforces the idea that what we're watching is neither fantasy nor escape. It may be entertaining - it must be if audiences are expected to sit still for an hour and a half - but it's not entertainment. As Karen Knights put it:

"The term Feature Length is loaded because it infers not only a unit of time but a style, for most people dramatic narrative. In FLV only the length is consistent with audience expectation."

PHOTO: JOHN STURROCK