

## SCAN LINES

by Joyce Nelson

### Backstretch : Death by advertising

The recent cancellation of the CBC series *Backstretch* raises some interesting questions about the medium itself. Apparently the series, created by poet/novelist David Helwig, was simply not doing well enough in the ratings to justify its continued existence after a brief second season. As a program, it was gently lyrical and quietly paced – a rather pleasant evocation of a semi-rural, fictional community. But what particularly caught my attention was the way in which the program was effectively destroyed by the ads.

On its own terms, *Backstretch* seemed to me to work well enough. The characters and story had a simple, human appeal. The setting and tone of the series seemed to accurately convey a way of life familiar to many Canadians. But the commercials within and around each episode made the series appear somehow inept. This effect had nothing to do with advertising interruptions per se. Like virtually all TV dramas, *Backstretch* was structured with these interruptions in mind. Thus, the breaks in the narrative were quite smoothly built into its unfolding. The writers clearly worked quite consciously with the dramatic structure

that advertising interruptions dictate. But what the series' creators did not seem to take into account was the fact that its style was markedly different from advertising's style.

The style of *Backstretch* was different: relatively non-glamorous settings and characters; gently paced editing-style and rhythms that seemed to evoke the slower and more natural way of life typifying its fictional community; unobtrusive camera-work and background music. In terms of what Morris Wolfe has called "jolts per minute," this series was decidedly non-jolting.

Aired uninterrupted, the episodes might have effectively established the viability of this style. As it was, however, any time a commercial interruption would occur in the program, the viewer would be confronted with the whole familiar battery of stylistic conventions that characterize current TV ads: the stunning visual effects, the rapid-fire editing pace, insistent music and language, flashy camera-work, glamorous models; in short, glamorous television. *This*, the ads seemed to say, is how the medium should be used. *This* is the state-of-the-art. *This* is viewing pleasure. When *Backstretch* would

resume after such a break, it would inevitably seem pallid, slow, inept... as though its makers did not know how to "correctly" use the medium.

What the fate of *Backstretch* illustrates is the degree to which, on commercial television, the ads dictate not only the structure that TV dramas must follow, but also the style. Any drama that does not match the advertising within it will not succeed in the long run. In other words, TV advertising sets the constraints and provides the context for all narrative: structurally, through its interruptions; stylistically, through its pace and visual "look," and imaginatively as well since only certain kinds of drama fit the mold. American dramatic series seem successfully designed to match the ads. They may do little else – but at least their style is consistent with the context.

We have come to expect commercial television to be a kind of seamless whole: in which dramas and ads flow unobtrusively in and out of one another, and where there is a consistent style that characterizes both. That style is now one of glamorous flashiness, a sort of "disco-look" that even the most mundane products try to give themselves through their ads. Given such a context, all programming must also achieve that disco flash – or else be overwhelmed by the ads and so appear "different," not quite up to par. *Backstretch* was too different (and perhaps purposely so) from the rest of prime-time TV. Its style ruptured the seamless whole, breaking the subtle continuity that con-

ventionally exists from program to ads to program. That the series itself was the victim of this rupture tells us something useful about the power of advertising-as-context.



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