Letters

'Video purified of television:
On why video art wants to be boring',
Beech & Beagles, Variant no. 18
www.variant.org.uk/18texts/18videobore.html

A response from Rachel Garfield and John Timberlake

Despite some sympathy with their respective positions and practices, we thought the essay by John Beagles and Dave Beech,'Video Purified of television; On why video art wants to be boring', made various errors and omissions, at times seeming to have been written in a partial vacuum (or perhaps derived from a single exhibition) which offers only a tendentious account of the histories of video and film, or for that matter the specificities of the current cultural moment. The exhortation for art to fail to be entertaining should have been located, not in Wollen but in Brecht, who argued that a critical distance was necessary for educating the masses towards a reflexive engagement rather than a passive consumption. Furthermore,that Matthew Higgs enjoyed *Rushmore* more than the Liverpool Biennale might say something about the Biennale and definitely something about Higgs, but little else. Long ago Art & Language laudably observed in response to the moans of Peter Fuller that arctic rations do not resemble haute cuisine.

So where do we start in responding to this? We re-affirm that film-making, at least as much as video making in Britain, is a site of contested claims to history which is still being fiercely fought out; there has been a consistent writing out of practices other than the structuralist and materialist films of the 1980s which the current exhibition at the Tate Britain, curated by Dave Curtis reveals. If Beech and Beagles deem video to be boring because of the official history then it is incumbent upon them to find the many other examples that exist and the writers that excavate and support less trumpeted versions of that history. But this would, in any case, be burning straw men.Any attempt to differentiate on the basis of class and power the formalist conceits of some video art from the popular pleasures of the televisual and cinematic has now to account for not only the gravitation of much managed fine art and its curation towards a more public and populist platform over the course of the past 10 years, but also the cultural ramifications of a decade or more in which a generation of artists have sought to engage with the vulgar pleasures of the popular, not as a marginal practice of negation but as an affirmative and legitimizing trope. We have in mind here a number of examples, from Pulp-videos-and-Blackcurrant-tango-ads as art at the ICA eight years ago to any number of Becks' Futures candidates. Yet Beech and Beagles fail to identify the importance of curators and policy shapers (what Jackie Hatfield calls the avant garde police) in what gets shown, documented and so remembered.

Video practice does indeed derive, in part, from Performance, and of course Expanded Cinema, but the breadth of this practise is not acknowledged by Beech and Beagles who see it all as merely 'glum earnestness'. By the same token, for every example of video art and film brought to bear to 'prove' its properties there are other examples to counter these points. For example,Chris Cunningham is not oppositional to TV and film; Isaac Julien, the Wilson twins et al aim for the sophistication of commercial film; William Wegman's dogs are funny and would not look out of place on some reality TV shows, as (more interestingly for us) might Jonathon Horowitz. Jan Svankmeijer (to conflate film and video again) comes out a strange surreal practise that is hard to place within the trajectory set up by Beech and Beagles. All this is not to 'disprove' Beech and Beagles points but to say that (1) vague assertions are not a convincing tool for argument and that (2) video as a practise is subject to the criticisms and interpretations of any other practise. Not even the proponents of what Beech & Beagles term 'serious video art' would dispute that "It is more than a coincidence that [it] looks nothing like television": but that said precious little ground can be made here beyond that already established for a wide range of other forms of fine art practice in relation to what might be posited as some form of pop culture counterpart—Callum Innes' work, after all, doesn't look much like graffiti, and only bears tenuous links to those natty tricks with Dulux we've all seen on daytime telly. Problems arise in trying to dismiss formal trends by virtue of their inevitable transience yet inevitable re-emergence some time in the future—it might well be increasingly hard at the moment to shake the notion that video projection will come to be seen as a defining embarrassment—like shoulder pads and big hair in the '80s—not just for being there, but for being everywhere—yet to state this just at the point when a stroll into Top Shop shows that big hair, hot pink batwing sleeves and shoulder-pads might actually be de rigeur for a generation too young to remember the horrors of twenty years ago seems deliberately anachronistic. Not all video artists foreground form and technique in the way that Steve McQueen, for example,does.But

Jonathan Horowitz
The Jonathan Horowitz Show,
2000.
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then Steve McQueen is as representative of video as Peter Halley, Thomas Ruff or Do Ho Suh are of painting,photography and sculpture respectively.

The point remains,which video practices are we talking about? It's symptomatic of Beech & Beagles' methodology that they embark on ascribing a geneology stretching from Diderot to Fried to Wollen to glum performance (as if Late Capitalist culture really would respect Peter Wollen's right to some ideological law of inheritance, rather than re-inventing and re-territorialising to its own ends) rather than emphasizing contingency and interpellation as that which is of value in Wollen's position. Moreover, given the notorious extent to which the postulates of professional art-crit remain empirically underdetermined, we would question ascribing such genealogies in the first place at the level at which art objects are made to cohere within managed

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The Jonathan Horowitz Show,
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culture. "If everybody has a video recorder...the argument goes, then video uses a 'language' everyone understands". But who does actually use this argument? It is not necessarily the medium that dictates the language. One could, for example, discern a pre-occupation with form and technique in any number of contemporary managed practices, from neo-minimalism to neo-conceptualism and so on, and obviously such practices bear no ideological relation to their eponymous 'geneological' antecedents. The demand for the 'good student' Beech & Beagles describe surely arises not from any need to proscribe dirty pleasures per se but from the need for a globally marketable—and trans-culturally negotiable—'universalism' defined by the tropes of hegemony. Hence the persistence of a kind of minimalism.

Alongside this anachronism and a touching pre-occupation with hygiene (we counted 11 implicit references to contagion, virginity and infection) there is the implicit attempt to differentiate video in terms of its ethical status: 'Video art's populism is bogus' being the most blunt. Well of course; populism generally is bogus, since it is founded upon the conceits and elisions of rhetorical façade, much like fascism of course, its party political cousin."Like a politician that has crossed the house"Beech & Beagles go on, "video's position has to be continually questioned, it's honesty continually questioned." Again, a curious anachronism, in an age when politicians' dishonesty is simply taken as read, regardless of whether they do anything as dastardly as 'crossing the house' or merely starting a war. On the one hand we again wonder why should video art more than any other art be questioned, and on the other whether the questioning of the ethical status of video serves as the point of differentiation that the authors imagine. Whilst we fully accept that the conferment of legitimacy on video-as-fine-art form was late coming in terms of recognition by some art mags, this process has to be contextualised in relation to that particular milieu, rather than in relation to video's status vis a vis film,which the authors attempt. Yet by citing Wollen as a major influence when writing about Godard,Beech & Beagles simplisiticically differentiate various modes of production and consumption of film and video as if some sort of ethical claim is at stake across the board. Binaries are unhelpful generally and there was a lot more to film history of the 1970s than Wollen. Furthermore, we might include practitioners as diverse as Agnes Varda,Steve Dwoskin or Michael Winterbottom in a list of film practitioners who have transferred their practice to video technology without any discernable shift in their respective ethical claims. Yet again, when the authors turn to the question of editing: "Nowadays the

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edit isn't everything. In fact the edit usually counts less than character, dialogue [etc]." Such a point has to be qualified. In an era of endless special edition redux re-releases and Director's Cuts, one could just as easily argue that editing means more—and in box office and DVD revenue terms it certainly is more important than ever before. 'Counting less' or 'counting more' is swampy relativism, when all aspects of film making have changed since the Soviet pioneers, bless 'em. What is called for here is a materialist understanding of how and why the role of editing has changed, and how the commodification of editing is necessitated in Late Capitalist managed culture, when (of course) under Soviet rule it meant something else.

'From Porridge to Pelf: *Young Adam* and the Mysterious Scottish Film Industry',
Mike Small, Variant no. 18
www.variant.org.uk/18texts/18youngadam.html

A response from May Miles Thomas, Director, Elemental Films

The Scottish Film Industry isn't nearly as mysterious as Mike Small would have us believe. The only mystery is why Variant was prepared to publish his poorly informed piece on Young Adam—less a cultural and economic analysis of Scottish film than another plug for a £4.5 million star vehicle distributed by US major, Warner Bros. This is not to deny David Mackenzie's long-cherished ambition to make Young Adam, nor the creative endeavour and achievement of its production, but an article seeking to criticise the public—or any other—film funding bodies should at the very least be factually accurate and offer substantive qualification in its argument; Mike Small's piece fails on both counts.

As one of the very few Scottish filmmakers to have made two feature films in Scotland, I consider myself well qualified to counter Small's assertions. That Scottish filmmakers are being denied access to "anything that falls outside the [UK and Scottish Film Bodies] world view" assumes that the UKFC and Scottish Screen have a world view to start with, or have adopted a cultural/commercial remit that seeks to exclude certain types of production. There's no evidence of this, just as there's no evidence of "increasing numbers of film-insiders" pointing the finger at the funders. Some films are funded, most are not. Such an unattributed and lax reproach is the stuff of tabloid hackdom, with no credence in terms of cultural criticism.

Public funding bodies are the softest of targets. A more relevant question is why do filmmakers need public subsidy when other creative industries rely wholly on private sector investment? Given that the majority finance of UK film production derives from tax shelter, industry and broadcast sources, the notion that public bodies wield influence is moot. Certainly within Scottish Screen, the issue of cultural relevance versus commercial ambition has never been addressed, let alone resolved, and as long as this situation prevails, Scottish film—which I define as indigenous producers, writers and directors—will be what it always has been: an arbitrary process by which unpaid or low paid practitioners strive to produce films by any means necessary. That is not to say that the public service arbiters of Scottish film are without blame. They are also without cash, industry leverage and confidence. Neither can they put our films into distribution, something of a disadvantage when their declared remit is to "promote Scotland's filmmaking culture to the world."

A better example of how a difficult and socially relevant story was realised is my most recent film, Solid Air, (which like its 'Scottish' counterparts, *Young Adam*, *Afterlife*, *Wilbur*, *Four Eyes* and *16 Years of Alcohol*, also premiered at the 2003 EIFF). Based on my father's case, Solid Air deals with the plight of workers seeking compensation for asbestos-related disease. The film, produced for less than a quarter of *Young Adam's* budget, may not have the cachet of literary provenance, or boast any 'name' talent, which possibly accounts for why the film has so far been buried by the media and ignored by its main investor, Scottish Screen. Mike Small rightly states that the viewer cares 'not a winkle' about how films are financed, but to suggest that *Young Adam* ought to have been financed and produced wholly within Scotland is an expression of breathtaking ignorance of how film finance operates. Scottish film has virtually no private investment, so at £4.5 million, *Young Adam* would have bled the public coffers dry at the expense of other, arguably more deserving productions. Besides, despite Ewan McGregor's public protests, he got his payday, Young Adam got made and the world turns.

There is no Scottish film industry: no private investment, no studio, no distributor, no sales agent, no film lab, no high-end post production facilities, no marketing company, no Dolby licensed sound studio. The sooner commentators grasp this reality, perhaps the sooner we can rid ourselves of the notion of Scotland as a viable filmmaking nation. Faced with this non-prospect, where do filmmakers go? Hell, even a long-dead self-lacerating junkie knew the answer to that.

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Mike Small responds

I'm looking forward to May Miles Thomas's future articles in Variant on Scottish Film given that, in her own words: "There is no Scottish film industry: no private investment, no studio, no distributor, no sales agent, no film lab, no high-end post production facilities, no marketing company, no Dolby licensed sound studio. The sooner commentators grasp this reality, perhaps the sooner we can rid ourselves of the notion of Scotland as a viable filmmaking nation." Which, strangely, given her strangled response, is exactly my point.

May claims that: "…there's no evidence of

'increasing numbers of film-insiders' pointing the finger at the funders. Some films are funded, most are not." Before continuing, and by now really working up a head of steam, "Such an unattributed and lax reproach is the stuff of tabloid hackdom, with no credence in terms of cultural criticism."

Well I never claimed to have such a lofty aim as 'cultural criticism', but her argument falls down somewhat because I carefully attribute the criticisms being made, specifically by Tilda Swinton and Alex Cox amongst others. Maybe she didn't read the article? Meanwhile, the picture she paints of a happy-clappy Scottish-film-utopia seems a fantastic, if slightly preternatural description.

My point was really to compare the Scottish film community with the Scottish publishing industry and the wider arts culture. In terms of the publishing industry—until a few years ago, when Giles Gordon 'retired' from London, it boasted few literary agents, and a crumbling infrastructure. Now it has signs of perhaps a little more ambition (though it is interesting to note that with Gordon's death go his clients).

When May Thomas argues that: "To suggest that *Young Adam* ought to have been financed and produced wholly within Scotland is an expression of breathtaking ignorance of how film finance operates" I fear she has completed the task of rewriting my article far better than I possibly could have myself. A better example of a failure to see beyond the current limitations couldn't be found. Presumably, under this line of thinking, we shouldn't engage in anything that doesn't currently exist, or strive for anything more ambitious than pandering to our existing inadequacies. The purpose of a publication like *Variant* is not to look at 'what is' and say 'good'.

Finally, I'm not entirely sure what May is ranting about when she says: "That is not to say that the public service arbiters of Scottish film are without blame…they are also without cash, industry leverage and confidence…neither can they put our films into distribution, something of a disadvantage when their declared remit is to 'promote Scotland's filmmaking culture to the world", given that that was, after all, the very point of my article.

Yours in Tabloid Hackdom, Mike Small