VIDEO NOUVEAU: THE MONTBELIARD VIDEO AND TELEVISION FESTIVAL



Pete Lee Wilson appears in Jonnie Turpie's feature-length rock musical about youth, race relations, and telecommunications, *Out of Order*. Screened at the Montbeliard International Video and Television Festival in western France, the work was produced by the Birmingham Film/Video Workshop in association with the British Film Institute and Channel Four.

Photo: John Sturrock, courtesy filmmakers

Amy Taubin

In its on-going quest for legitimization, the 20-year-old (i.e., relatively fledgling) field of U.S. independent video has responded eagerly to the attentions paid it by European programmers and festivals. While the only large video festival in the U.S. has been the American Film Institute's National Video Festival in Los Angeles (which, having lost its Sony funding, has been forced to limit its publicity, thus whittling its audience considerably), Europe boasts dozens, the most prestigious being the Montbeliard International Video and Television Festival in France and the World Wide Video Festival in the Netherlands. For many years, these festivals were language phobic. Their "talent scouts," who annually appeared at the Kitchen or Electronic Arts Intermix in New York City, were interested only in work that spoke what they saw as an international language of visual images. That their bias was a function of their limited knowledge of English is understandable. That they were, to the man (for men they were, almost without exception) far too arrogant to admit that this was the case is not. At any rate, long before there was MTV or *Alive from Off Center* to encourage video art down the contentless path, there was the lure of the European festival circuit.

About two years ago, the tide began to shift. In part, this was thanks to an increased fascination on the part of European intellectuals with the third world—countries in which state-of-the-art electronic art facilities were conspicuously lacking, and where the relationship between politics and cultural production is eye-catchingly clear. It was also apparent that, despite the on-going development of video postproduction technology, interest in electronic image processing and "visual humming" had run out. One of the 1988 prize winners at World Wide was *Rain* (*La Pluie*), an hour-long narrative about daily life in a small Mozambique village, threatened by drought and under constant guerilla attack by forces of the South African apartheid regime. Directed by Licinio Azevedo and Brigitte Bagnol, *Rain* was coproduced by the Mozambique National Film Institute and the Montbeliard Cultural Activity Center. It also showed up in the "information" section of the 1988 Montbeliard Festival.

Montbeliard is a small town (population: 30,000) in the west of France, totally dominated, as is the surrounding region, by the Peugeot auto industry. As part of a move to decentralize cultural activities beyond the Paris city limits, seven years ago the government funded the Montbeliard International Video Festival. A year-round operation with some very slight relationship to the local television station, it produces, at two year intervals, a week-long festival geared to the international independent video "community," in which

the local population takes absolutely no interest—except insofar as it promotes tourism. The 1982 and 1984 festivals, dominated by the presence on the organizing committee of French video theoretician Jean-Paul Fargier, who writes for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, were video art oriented. But since Fargier's departure in 1985, the festival has become more concerned with television. "Canal Plus" has replaced "signifier/signified" as the operative buzz phrase. Director Pierre Bongiovanni describes the festival as a "dream of television...a way of criticizing the current state of television production and introducing a fantasy of its future."

The festival, whose theme in 1988 was "Ethics and Television," was divided into several sections: a competition; an international survey that included extremely interesting programs from Canada (a retrospective of documentaries by Robert Morin and a group show curated by Morin), two programs from the U.S. (one curated by Daniel Minahan from the Kitchen and the other by Dan Walworth from Artists Space, who selected a group of South Korean tapes), as well as programs from Brazil, Australia, and many Western European countries; an anthropology and current affairs program; an education sector; four video installations and three multi-media performances; and related panel discussions. The tensions between the more parochial, art-oriented competition and the politically conscious, eclectic informational section came to a head when the festival's daily journal reported that French video artist and competition juror Robert Cahen objected to the special award given to Robert Morin on the grounds that Morin's work was too "film derivative."

Projectors and monitors in the seven screening rooms were switched on at 9 a.m. and ran continuously until just before midnight. (In general, the screenings were well-organized and technically of high quality.) In addition to the regularly scheduled programs, several hundred tapes were available at the library on request—in the majority were competition rejects, some were far more interesting than most of the prize winners. With such abundance, everyone channel-switches with abandon, and ends up with a festival of her/his own devising. In addition to the aforementioned Morin retro and *Rain* (produced by festival organizer Michel Bongiovanni, who is also a prime mover behind Euroaim—the organization of European independents currently involved in generating an international database of independent production), the most compelling pieces I saw were Rotraut Pape's *Mutter, Vater Ist Tot* (an ironic, compact treatment of a *Dallas* scenario, produced with the German group M. Raskin Stichting) and Pape's scream-of-outrage *Le Gran Batard* (produced with the French group Frigo); Jonnie Turpie's *Out of Order* (an exuberant feature-length rock musical about youth, race relations, and telecommunications, set in Birmingham, England and made with the Channel Four funded Birmingham Workshop); and, in the U.S. selections, Julie Zando's *Hey Bud* and Jem Cohen's *This Is the History of New York*.

Guests of the festival—producers of tapes in the competition, curators of informational shows, panelists, judges, and critics—are treated extremely hospitably. The festival provides not only transportation and accommodations but what the U.S. contingent jovially referred to as food stamps—in sufficient quantities to see one through lunch and most of dinner in a variety of informal, mostly very good, restaurants.

For anyone who's interested, the grand prize went to the Belgian tape *Entre Deux Tours* (*Between Two Towers*), by Rob Rombout, a tastefully serious 15-minute narrative with some discreet electronic effects, formally reminiscent of early Alain Resnais. With the exception of *Out of Order*, the four big winners and the nine runner-ups all signaled their commitment to high art via their oppressive electronic mood music tracks. It may or may not be significant that none of the U.S. tapes in competition took a prize.

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