

Monodramas



10 videos for
broadcast television
18:20 min. (loop)
First broadcast in 1992
by BCTV Vancouver

The *Monodramas* are a series of ten thirty- and sixty-second videos conceived by Douglas as inserts during commercial breaks on Canadian cable television. They were broadcast in Vancouver (BCTV) and Toronto (CKVR) in 1992 and in Caracas, Venezuela (Televen Channel 10) in 1997 but were not identified as part of an artistic project. They show real-time, banal scenes in unspectacular places, whose formal language quotes and, at the same time, undermines the dramatization of popular TV formats. For example, they operate with melodramatic or absurd exaggerations, suspense effects, or pseudo-documentary formats such as TV confession, albeit defying any logical or narrative resolution. What is more, the lack of fast cuts and unambiguous messages causes the videos to collide with the conventions of their immediate media setting: in the context of commercial ads, they create an effect of radical emptying that makes them interruptions in the smoothly unwinding, suggestive machinery of television. This is outlined below with the aid of several examples.

The first of which is the example most obviously based on the form of commercials, namely *As Is*, which starts with a camera pan along an old Ford Granada, parked along a suburb roadside, being repaired by three men. Then we see two further specimens of this outdated model on the highway and driving into a parking lot. The whole sequence is accompanied by a Chic song from the late seventies. The video ends with two title cards: “For Less/Luxury.” The car as a fetishized consumer item and projection surface for clichéd fantasies of freedom, affluence, and technological progress is introduced here in the mundane form of middle-class used cars in need of repair. Though introduced as the “protagonists” of the clip, they are awarded, narratively speaking, very limited functionality: they apparently serve merely as indicators of the beginning, middle, and end of an empty narration, whose primary purpose is to first invoke filmic conventions and popular imagination, only to then leave them hanging. The concluding, negative advertising message accentuates the “emptying,”

anticlimactic gesture of the clip but is simultaneously intended as a subversive commentary on its media context.

In *Eye on You*, we see a young man in his apartment, crossing his living room, past a turned-on TV, while eating a pizza. His movements are carried out synchronously to those of the male figure on-screen. He goes out onto the balcony where his eye falls upon a stranger standing on a slope below the house. He leaves the apartment and goes to the place where he had just seen the stranger, only to find that he has meanwhile vanished without a trace. He glances up to the balcony whence the camera is watching him. The scenes are accompanied by a dramatic musical soundtrack whose suspense curve culminates at the moment when the stranger cannot be found. The narrative logic of this sequence of scenes is revealed directly by means of the way in which it integrates and duplicates familiar media sources. At the moment of maximum openness and tension, it is, however, cut short: the promise of a direct confrontation between both protagonists, of



a communication that either opens up new narrative options or creates the immediate satisfaction of a happy resolution, remains unfulfilled. Similarly, the *monodramatic* principle precludes a serial continuation of the story, as is usual in television. The video ends up leaving the viewer in the role of the observer, whose gaze is returned by the protagonist in the picture. The “Eye on You” is the medium’s reciprocated gaze at the viewer in the moment where all narrative certainty vanishes. *Up* shows a group of three men on a park bench. In the foreground, we see the motionless hand of someone lying on the grass. The men seem to be staring at something moving offscreen to the left, apparently someone approaching the person lying on the ground. We hear a voice from the off – “Get up!” – whereupon the fingers of the hand move briefly. The expressions and gestures of the men on the park bench do not reveal any kind of reaction. The real plot addressing the viewer in front of the television takes place here beyond the field of view and can only be followed indirectly by listening to the voice of

an invisible speaker and by observing the three onlookers in the picture. In this way, the viewers are, so to speak, mirrored back into the picture, viewing themselves in the viewers. Yet this centered, non-peripheral view likewise refuses to give any insight into what is really happening at its edges. Multiply mirrored and diverted, vision reverberates back to itself. Thus it is not the communication between the actors that is suspended here but rather the communication between the medium and the viewer, taking place by way of film-specific conventions.

Guilty shows three versions of an interview situation in which the same monologue is delivered by different people. The characters are standing on a street on the outskirts of town or in a park, speaking into the camera face-on. Their faces have been made unrecognizable with large pixels. In fluid speech, they talk about an unspecified guilt haunting them and about voices they hear, which talk to them in great numbers, yet in a highly individualized way. Only as long as the characters are speaking are these admoni-

tions drowned out for a short while. The three speakers are in a schizoid state, in which they are at once transmitters of a message as well as recipients of multiple, contradictory messages that condense in their perception into a polyphonic murmur. As such, they embody the prototype TV consumer, whose subjectivity disappears in and is reinsured by the imaginary “we” of the community. At the same time, the anonymous voices in the recurrent leitmotif “we shall see” formulate the program of the medium itself, projecting the moment of cognitive vision, narrative dissolution, and the satisfaction of all needs into an uncertain future.

In a tautological movement, the *Monodramas* thereby refer to themselves, not getting beyond the reference to their own functioning. They double media conventions, not to create communicative links but rather to put them in abeyance for a limited time. Consequently, the scene of the drama is not that which is seen. It takes place in the very process of seeing again, as a renewal of perception.

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