

Royal Photographic Society Audio Visual Group

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Revelation

Sir George and Lady Doreen Pollock

Sir George and Lady Doreen Pollock have been important figures in the Royal Photographic Society since the 1960s, and their enthusiasm for audiovisual practice has promoted the practice in the UK and has been a driving force behind the development of the audio visual branch of the Society. In Lady Doreen's absence, Sir George discusses the history of the Royal Photographic Society Audio Visual group, and some of their collaborative works.

JA How did you become aware of AV work?

SGP Slide-tape with dissolve was brought from France to England by Ray Beaumont-Crags. He was invited by *Amateur Photographer* to show his work at a photo-fair in 1965. He was then invited by the RPS's kinematographic group who immediately gave him one of the Society's distinctions. A few other people began to take it up, particularly a man called Michael Tickner. He was already doing a single projector show called *Audioscope* and bought a mechanical dissolver and converted it into a twin-projector dissolving view. My wife, Doreen and I saw Ray's work in about 1969 and were absolutely fascinated by it. The first sequence – we call each item a 'sequence' or a 'programme' – we sent to an international competition was in 1971 in Epinal in Eastern France, which had already been going annually for eleven years.

JA At what point did a group of AV practitioners begin emerging?

SGP By 1971, by which time I was on the council of the RPS, it was fairly well established. Doreen and I had been running lots of courses all over the country, mostly in adult education places. Councils were able to afford them in those days. It took up all of our time. We did it professionally, charging for shows,

with sponsorship in addition from Agfa and Olympus, *Practical Photography* and the makers of the AV equipment. Our shows were not the biggest. In 1971 I thought it would be a good idea if the RPS created a new distinctions panel for AV work, so I proposed it to the panel and they agreed and we had our first meeting in 1972. We were having these meetings regularly and, coming back from one in East Anglia once, Doreen suggested that we ought to have our own magazine for AV workers. I put this to the council who agreed, and the first issue of *AV News* was produced in 1976. At a meeting in Bath, someone suggested that we ought to have a group. I put that to the RPS who agreed, and the RPS AV group was formed in 1977. The magazine then became the group magazine.

JA What fascinates you about this medium?

SGP Firstly, you can put across thoughts, ideas and artistic interpretations of poetry and music – which is my speciality – very quickly. But the real visual beauty is the ‘dissolve’: the magical transformation from one image to another, which can be extraordinarily beautiful. It’s more like a short story than a novel – a visual poem if you like. There’s an agreed international maximum length of twelve minutes for a sequence that is entered into a competition. This means that you have to condense your ideas and thoughts very considerably. This is very good as it concentrates the mind! We became particular experts at the dissolve. Later developments have been towards a greater use of text than we did – Peter Coles’ work in particular. The combination of images and text is interesting in itself. We did use text, particularly for our historical sequences. The combination of everything is crucial in AV – it has to be a complete work. It is so much harder to get ideas across in single images.

JA How were the national and international competitions co-ordinated?

SGP The French invented these competitions, and there were two or three important international events each year. They also devised the rules that have been followed ever since, such as the maximum duration of a sequence.

JA As an author of these works, are such rules restrictive to the creative process?

SGP It seldom bothered us; in the big shows that were two-screen back-projected, we always finished with a fairly long travel type of feature. The longest we ever did was thirty-two minutes, which was *The Exploration of the Colorado by Major Powell*, but those were not suitable for competition. Most of our work was within the time-limit. Long AVs are not like long films: it's extremely difficult to maintain the audience's interest for a long period of time in this format.

JA Aspects of AV – the sequence, the dissolve and the projected image – remove it from conventional photography and place it closer to film and video. How do you see AV in relation to film?

SGP Of course film grew out of the Magic Lantern show. As far as movement is concerned, when we were projecting slides, movement was difficult to achieve and not very satisfactory. Now, there has been a complete revolution into digital; movement – panning, zooming – all these things are possible, which is beginning to blur the distinction between movies and AV. There are one or two workers who can use movement satisfactorily or in a way that works. But basically an AV is a series of single images which simply dissolve into one another, and even in digital it's still much the same.

JA The *Revelation* sequence (that is a response to the Biblical text The Revelation of St. John the Divine) was one of your wife's sequences, but could you give an insight into why she made this work?

SGP She is not religious at all, although she was educated in a Church of England boarding school. I don't think she was much of a believer of any sort. I think it was simply the beauty of the language of that passage. The language is of course absolute nonsense! But there are lovely things like: '...the leaves are for the healing of the nations...' And the text goes quite well with the abstract sequence of images. They were all her photographs. I helped her with the sound and she of course selected the bits that she wanted out of Revelation.

JA How was *Revelation* received at the time?

SGP It was received very well and it won the first prize in the third Opeus International Festival. Largely perhaps because there were two Americans on the jury, one who was head of the art department in his school in Maine, and the other was head of the English school. It obviously made a lot of sense to them!

JA Tell us a little about the task you are currently undertaking to collect and archive sequences by AV workers?

SGP A constant anxiety for me and other workers is that slide-tape sequences are essentially ephemeral. Equipment is required to play them, and they are difficult to collect. There are collections of slide-tape shows already such as the International Federation of Photographic Art. There are at least two in France, but we never managed to get one started in Britain. When digital came along, and you could put a whole series of sequences on one disc, suddenly the thing becomes easily collectable. I filmed ten of our sequences, so that I could produce enough discs to sell or give around so that our works will not simply disappear. Then I thought that perhaps the National Museum of Film, Photography and Television in Bradford might be interested. They were in fact prepared to collect discs containing AVs of the best work of key practitioners. I thought that we could create an RPS panel to help collect and decide what work to submit to the archive. The ideal way to document the sequences is to scan each slide and then recreate the whole thing digitally. If you do it simply by filming, you lose quite a lot of quality, but it is still useable, and is much easier. Where it can be done digitally, we get the authors to do it. Where it can only be done by filming, we are happy to accept that. So far we have only got Doreen's and my work, and Peter Coles, and a worker called Norman Veal, who is now aged eighty-eight. We are just at the beginning.

JA How much work do you hope to collect?

SGP Let's say between the slide-tape period (c. 1972 – 2002), there must be at least twenty 'key workers'. Some who have produced only one or two sequences, but others, like Peter Coles, who have made about two-hundred. We produced about seventy or eighty sequences.

JA Do you think the role of the worker as performer of these sequences is worth considering?

SGP Originally, audiovisual meant a lot more than slide-tape shows, and particularly in education it has a wider meaning. We adopted 'slide-sound sequences'. I wanted people to understand that you didn't have to have tape – you could have live commentary or live music. We had one worker, Hazel Andrea who was a singing teacher, and she played guitar and sung whilst dissolving from one slide to another with her feet! Photography was of course part of it, but it was a live performance.

Kingdom Come

Peter Coles

Peter Coles is a prolific audio visual worker, who has produced more than two-hundred sequences, achieving over one hundred and fifty awards internationally. His backgrounds in chemistry, theology, education, local government and publishing have informed a diverse portfolio of works. A published author of many volumes, and describing himself as a 'word-monger', poetry is particularly important to Coles' AV works, and he collaborated with Collin Balls on *Motorway*.

JA How were you introduced to the slide-tape format?

PC In 1969, the audio-visual aid officer where I worked in Buckinghamshire was playing with two slide carousels. He put his hand in front of one carousel and then the other, creating a rudimentary dissolve. I was supposed to be delivering a twenty-minute introduction to somebody talking about the 'environment', so I made a little presentation using two projectors, and I did what my colleague had done, with my two hands in front of the projectors. When I was promoted and became chief education officer for Berkshire, people took over what I had previously been doing. I thought I had better develop these simple dissolves, and so I started experimenting with audiovisual programs.

JA Which visual artists were you aware of at that time?

PC The person who influenced me at the time was David Hockney. I was quite amazed to find that someone was interested in the same thing as me, and was famous for it. Hockney had just started his *Joiners* work. It wasn't audio visual of course, but it was, in a way, the same thing: he was putting together images to make a whole. It was not just his imagery, but what he was saying about imagery that was influencing me.

JA Could you describe how you came to make the *Kingdom Come* sequence?

PC I had been invited to go to Northern Ireland and into the Republic to show some of my own work and to lead some AV workshops. The first evening, I had just crossed over the boarder from the North into Dundalk and a lady police officer had just been killed. It was then that the shock of all the 'Troubles' hit me. The following day I went to a Roman Catholic service with the gentleman I was staying with, Sean Casey who took me to a big, modern church. As I walked into the building, the music was playing that I eventually used for the sequence, *Jesus Remember me when I come into your Kingdom* which was being played on a tape. As I entered there was one woman kneeling amidst all this, praying. I imagined what she might be praying for – peace. So, with permission, I started taking photographs in the church, and immediately felt I had to do something with it all. Ideas were beginning to come into my head about the Irish 'problem' and my view was that it couldn't be solved in this generation, but perhaps the solution lay in the next generation. I suppose in Christian terms, unless you become like a little child, we cannot enter the Kingdom. The people I was staying with would take me to places where I could take the photographs. I was quite shocked to have tanks and soldiers pointing their guns at me as we went around. It was an introduction to a completely different way of life to my little placid place where I lived in Hebden Bridge.

JA I wondered whether the title alluded to notions of a 'promised land' or ideas about territory?

PC Not really, no. Perhaps 'promised' in a Christian rather than a Jewish sense. I did use the phrase in the sequence; 'the kingdom is within you'. I came in ignorance of the 'Troubles' from an England that was unaware of why there was a problem. As I saw it, there was hate that had grown up through elitist differences, and not real religious differences, but secular creations of religious differences.

JA How was *Kingdom Come* received when it was first shown?

PC It was first seen at an international festival in Bath in 1992. People commented favourably but some thought I was trying to copy a German

worker of Romanian origin, Srdjan Plavska. He was using maybe as many as four projectors to suggest visual movement within his sequences. People thought I was copying him, although I hadn't. It did moderately well, but it did a lot better aboard, winning the European cup in Epinal in 1994.

JA Why do you think it did better aboard?

PC In Bath, two or three people on the jury understood what I was trying to do and appreciated it. But on the whole, I think the English were a bit slow to recognise development. At that stage the English were more interested in pictures and music, rather than the development of ideas. It did well in France, where they thought I had been faithful to a Christian message, and understood and liked that integrity.

JA Could you give an idea of the atmosphere at some of these festivals? Were they competitive?

PC There was a certain friendliness in the AV fraternity; people were competitive, but they didn't seem to mind if they didn't win. The competition was a reason for being there but there was no animosity. People regarded success as a bonus rather than an aim. That was quite important, and this has continued over these several decades: a willingness to share skill rather than being possessive.

JA How active is the AV scene nowadays?

PC Strangely enough, I expected it to grow but it hasn't. About the same number of people are involved as there were two or three decades ago. People imagined it would get easier through digital but it's actually become more difficult – to do it well. My recent experience, through going to competitions, is that quality is gradually increasing. I was at a little competition between Leeds and Essex recently, and as I watched I thought 'There's no rubbish at all, it's all good', and I couldn't have said that a decade ago.

JA I'm picturing you creating dissolves with your hands and thinking how much more 'hands on' it was when you started and how different it must be working in front of a computer...

PC It is less 'hands on' but it is no less 'minds on'. You have got to think a lot and be innovative with the brain more than you once had to.

Motorway
Colin Balls

Colin Balls has been involved in audiovisual since the late 1960s, as a practitioner and as a manufacturer of audiovisual equipment. His sequence *Motorway* that he made in the early 1980s was in pursuit of his passion for transport, and developed into an exploration of ideas about the disjointed nature of the body and mind when engaged in monotonous activity such as driving. He has recently begun to establish a collection of exhibits for a museum of audiovisual equipment, documenting their evolution from the Victorian Magic Lantern to the present day. The museum is located within the British Commercial Vehicle Museum in Leyland, Lancashire and will be open from April this year.

JA How did you become involved with working with audiovisual?

CB I've been involved in AV for forty years now. The beginnings were in 1968 when I saw an AV show by Richard Tucker. He did work for Nikon and took his shows all over the country. He did a show with a manual control unit that impressed me sufficiently to make me want to take the subject up. I've been doing it as a business – making AV equipment – as well as a hobby ever since. I became involved towards the end of the 1960s, and I got my fellowship with the RPS and did workshops across the country with a specialist in sound, John Edson.

JA What sort of equipment did you manufacture?

CB I worked for Leyland Motors as an engineer in the 1970s, and at the time, the equipment being used for AV presentations was very cumbersome: you needed projectors, a controller unit, amplifier and speakers, and a tape recorder. I thought there was a niche market here, so I designed a unit that stood alone and did everything. That was marketed and known as the Royale AV System. It took two years to design and build it, and my wife and I set up a company and proceeded to design, make, market and sell the unit, which retailed initially at £1,500. We made a living from it for the next twenty-one years and sold about 1,000 units (including re-sales). We sold a lot to industry

(commerce, education) and a lot to private individuals because there was nothing else available at the time.

JA So was the Royale a standard piece of equipment?

CB It was recognised as *the* piece of equipment to use for those who could afford it. I transferred the design to a digital version which we have been making for the last seven or eight years. However, many of the companies we sold to didn't have the expertise to make the programmes, so we could provide this service for them as well. There were three of us involved in making these programmes: myself, Peter Coles – who wrote the words – and Andrew Brittain who provided the voice-over. Once, at the end of a professional recording session, I had the script for *Motorway* and asked Andrew if he would mind reading it. He did a quick read-through and recorded the final version in only one take. We've moved on considerably since *Motorway*. It is very old now and you have seen out of context: It is important to see the programmes on the equipment for which they were intended, as all equipment has limitations. It really needs to be seen on a big screen, with big sound, in a big room with an audience.

JA I enjoyed *Motorway*, not least because it feels like something of a relic of another era.

CB The roads are still just as wet! Originally I didn't take the images for the purpose of that programme – I just enjoyed photographing the motorway in the worst weather conditions that I could. When I had the images I asked Peter Coles whether he thought we could make anything of them. Peter described the idea that when you are travelling on a motorway your mind can wander almost separately from yourself. We do of course eventually arrive at our destination together. But sometimes my mind prefers its solitary company and wanders aimlessly in daydreams. Peter worked on the words for about three weeks and then we put it all together. It's gone on to do very well at AV festivals worldwide. I don't know why but the French in particular love it. The English are not too keen – they think they should understand the words intimately, but

in this case they are not really meant to be understood; they are an ebb and a flow and are really part of the music and the mood. Hopefully that came across.

JA How did the Phil Collins music get in there?

CB Peter suggested that there was a song within it and he sent me the record with a suggested track on. I listened to the album and really liked one which I put in to the soundtrack, although actually it wasn't the one that Peter had initially suggested. The idea was that you could be driving along listening to the radio, and then your mind starts to wander. If you did that today you'd be crushed under the nearest 40-ton lorry! Traffic has certainly moved on a lot since then. Some of those images – I'm sorry to say – I took whilst driving. To try that in the density of traffic today would be crazy! I used to make a one hundred mile journey to Loughborough on business once a week at that time, and I just liked the change of conditions in the weather and how it changed the appearance of the road. The subject is rather unusual isn't it?

JA Yes, perhaps quite mundane?

CB But I hope the pictures are not mundane. It sounds mundane but the subject rapidly becomes historical. I love industry; slagheaps, steelworks, coalmines... they're all gone now. I simply find a visual attraction in them, and I'm a transport enthusiast anyway. I just enjoy doing it.