

DOREEN TAYLOR meets the remarkable film-maker who fought back against — and into — the box

Soap gets under your skin

JOAN BRADERMAN is an American independent producer and academic who admits that, despite herself, TV's *Dynasty* has been intruding into her key personal relationships for several years. Early last year, she set herself the task of finding out why.

Why, she asked, do a hundred million people in 78 countries watch *Dynasty*, what is the attraction of this "department store of dressed-to-kill aliens?"

The result of her inquiries, *Joan Does Dynasty*, is an amazing and hilarious compilation of *Dynasty* excerpts overlaid with her own image. It could be described, but only inadequately, as a media critique of the show. Sometimes, Joan Braderman is tucked into the corner of the screen; sometimes she is apparently suspended, serene and horizontal, above the action; on occasion the bare chest of a *Dynasty* male is revealed through her own outline.

She is at her sharpest peering out from behind shapes cut from a Mexican mask which reveal her eyes and mouth only as the words flood out in fierce mockery.

Her verbal rapier slashes at what is happening in Alexis's bath tub, or at mother and daughter confrontations, and

she applauds vociferously as Alexis snaps at McVane: "Get out of my sight, you miserable has-been."

"God, I love it when she says things like that," Braderman says. "Centuries of women's oppression, a huge passionate movement against it, and where are we in 1986? Engaged in twisted pleasure, while this monstrous victim of fashion delivers verbal karate chops, issuing bursts of smoke through her shiny, blood-red, key-light lips."

That gives a glimpse of the style of the production and of Braderman herself. She has developed a reputation in academic and media circles for producing "stand-up theory," and *Joan Does Dynasty* is comic as well as didactic. It's full of black humour. It's also deadly serious. And it was certainly one of the highlights last week of the three-day Workshop Event in Edinburgh's Film Festival.

Braderman began the *Dynasty* project by recording some 13 hours of the serial, screening and rescreening until she had identified the clips that suited her purpose. She laid these down on tape, prepared her own script, gave her own performance to overlay them, and then put the whole thing together.



Masked avenger: a scene from *Joan Goes Dynasty*

Her co-director and co-editor was Manuel de Landa, a Mexican producer with whom she has worked often in the past, particularly in South America, but though the Mexican mask idea came from de Landa, the programme as a whole is very much her own.

"You rarely see a female speaking her own lines on US television," she said, "particularly a female intellectual and one with a dirty mouth."

But it is not only her free use of language that keeps *Joan Does Dynasty* off the main US broadcast channels. It is also fear on the part of the companies of having to join Braderman in the law courts. She admits cheerfully that she recorded the tapes off transmission on to three-quarter inch videotape, and that her attitude to copyright is a little cavalier.

"I'm just waiting to be sued because I don't really have any-

thing much to lose," she said. "And it would raise the whole issue of who owns the air anyway." This, and how to devise an alternative to the commercially funded US broadcast system are two of her main preoccupations.

She started making films young and was already producing when she was at Radcliffe College at Harvard to study English literature. Harvard had no film department and she gained her theoretical film

knowledge at the New York University Film School. In those days her main work was in film and she admits that she had all the typical film student's belief that video was "ugly and hopeless."

At the same time, she recalls a phobia in herself that she has since noticed in her woman students — a phobia about machines which made them less confident with a camera than their male colleagues. She began to look for something

that gave her more control, and taught herself video on half-inch Sony off-cuts.

"With video you can shape something, almost sculpt it yourself, and then do it all over again at the editing desk, if you want to. The aesthetic is very different from film but very satisfying."

She now teaches both film and video, as associate professor of Television Production at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, and as associate professor of Film and Video in New York's School of Visual Arts. This move into teaching came partly because she found that, as an independent producer (in the United States the word independent has more connotations of "alternative" than the British meaning of someone who is not a staff member of the bigger broadcasting organisations) she spent 90 per cent of her time raising money. But she loves to teach a subject that gives her the title of video artist rather than video producer.

She is also a missionary who has grown tired of the aesthetic of art video, which has static qualities that grew out of its links with painting. But the long slow shot is not for television, which in its broadcast form is fast-paced and loud, she claims, and this is what she wants to use as her own technique to comment upon it.

The final conclusions of her study into the attraction of *Dynasty* all centre on power — the power of those who control television, the question of who owns the air.

"Alexis is in the box... but she really is installed in your life and in my life. She's there every Wednesday night and she's watching us because she's got the power," says Braderman's commentary, in the last moments of *Joan Does Dynasty*.

The question of our times, she concludes, is *who* is in the box, because that is where power lives. "She says she wants to get out. That's bullshit. The problem is we need to get in."

Some brave channel should broadcast it.