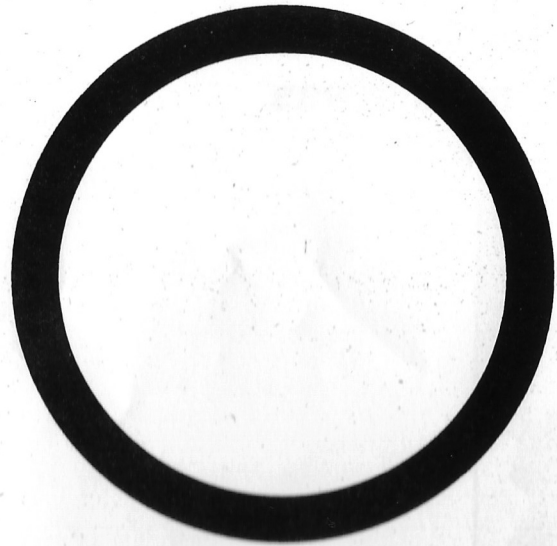


# Confessions of an Unrepentant Intellectual:



**An Interview with Oliver Hockenhull**  
**by Tania Bolskaya**

**A**s an SFU student in the 1980s, Oliver Hockenhull came to film through a bit of friendly advice. Immersed in a heady mix of politics, sociology, philosophy, and communications, it was suggested that he add an art to his repertoire as a means of not just thinking but doing. Since 1988's *Determinations*, a multi-dimensional exploration of the Squamish Five, Hockenhull has been both thinking and doing — creating film essays which challenge audiences to enter and explore their complex topics. His most recent work, *Building Heaven, Remembering Earth: Confessions of a Fallen Architect*, was selected for the *Documentary competition at this year's Vancouver International Film Festival and given the honour of three screenings in the festival fortnight.*

*Building Heaven, Remembering Earth is, however, not a documentary. Neither is it a narrative or fictional film. It falls into a special category reserved for the works of filmmakers who are determined to remain unbound by the conventions of mainstream cinema. As with most films that realize their potential as completely cinematic experiences, this film is difficult to describe. It is not, like most narrative films, a novel told through moving pictures. Nor is it, like many documentaries, a textbook illustrated with dramatic action and oral storytelling. It is part travelogue, as Hockenhull visits great architectural works of Europe, North America and India, and provides a travel diary voice-over. There is a dramatic structure in which fictional characters interact with the travelling Hockenhull. Architectural theory is discussed, as is the social well-being of the planet. However, the itemization of these parts cannot recreate the visual, aural, intellectual whole. During the festival, I spoke with Hockenhull about his work and his experiences as a Canadian film essayist.*

**DISORDER: What were your inspirations for this particular film?**

**Oliver Hockenhull:** There's actually a long history of filmmakers who explore issues in a film essay form. This isn't really a documentary, it's really a film essay, and that tradition goes back to someone like Dziga Vertov. More recently, [it could be compared to the work of] someone like Chris Marker, who deals with the relationship between the subject matter and the imagination, so that it becomes a living engagement with the subject matter. One of the problems that we find with general media is that it is supposedly factual, but it's not actually a living thing. You're not dealing with a reflection on problems or questions or issues. I think that my work is interested in doing that all the time. I think it's very important to have the beauty of life and be part of the answer to any question. We can see that in the tradition of the written essay as well, where there is the issue and then there is contemplation of the issue from a personal viewpoint. Then that personal viewpoint expands to a transpersonal viewpoint as well.

**...where the driest essay is the one which just disseminates information. It's such a complex film, there are so many elements — you have the narrative, you have actors, you have distinctive visuals. Before you put the film together, how much was planned, how much did you find along the way?**

I think that it's important to realise that this kind of film is process-oriented, so there is an immediacy with the material, but that immediacy is founded on a long research period. My research may take me a year and half before I shoot. I'm really doing a lot of reading, I'm doing a lot of thinking about these issues and reflecting. Someone mentioned at one

screening

that they found the work full of theory.

Actually I've read all of that stuff, but I use it as manure. I let things grow out of it, let the poetry or my own imagination grow out of it. And it's not heavily theory-oriented. Someone who may be unfamiliar with architectural theory or French theory or deconstructionist theory [can still enjoy my work].

**Right now there's a big market for the documentary, but mostly the kind of documentary you can watch on TV at 9 pm, like *Biography*. How do you see your film fitting into...**

...the marketplace?

**Into the marketplace but also into people's lives?**

I think it was Tom Wolfe, or Norman Mailer, who said, 'Television has gotten to the point where it's scraping the top of the barrel.' There's so much space out there, they're looking. I'm not saying that it's going to sell everywhere, but I think it'll get shown on Finnish TV or French TV or Bravo. I do think it's still a hard sell on these kind of works that are a little more demanding on people. What happened was that this film was mostly funded by the Canada Council. The Canada Council is a jury process, and it's people I don't know. These people may be artists but they're also citizens. They're also just regular people who go to school, who have mothers and sisters and brothers who own gas stations. They're the ones who say, 'Yes, we think this is of value. We want to allow people to see another way of seeing the world.' Luckily in Canada there is still that venue available.

**This film was shot completely in digital. What has digital meant for you?**

It's really great in a certain way. I'm traditionally a filmmaker, I like to work in film because of the

quality

of the image, it makes a difference. For this project, it was no bigger than your [Walkman-sized] tape recorder, the camera that I shot with. It allowed me to travel very easily and also it allowed a much greater intimacy with the material and with myself. It's not really required to have a crew. It's a completely different way of thinking about the world itself, too. For me it really has to do with the transformative capabilities of the digital medium because it's purely a code. That makes you accept the prominence today of the transformative quality of the medium. McLuhan said that when a new medium comes into being, people use it in traditional ways. The big argument in Constructivism in the Russians was that people were using cinema as if it were theatre. Well, it's not theatre. You don't have to rely on the confines of theatre to make movies. The jump cut was done in 1918 by the Constructivists. Hollywood finds it even difficult now to accept [jump cuts] in a film, that you can play with time. The digital is even more open to purely interpretive qualities. The tools of transforming an image are accessible now to anybody with a \$10,000 computer. That's still a hell of a lot less than it was five years ago, and it will be a lot less in a couple more years. Special effects are much more easily available.

**There was a big shift in tone when your film moves from the West to the East. For me it was a shift from solids and inanimates to a living, breathing world. Is that something you wanted to express to the audience?**

There is a shift, but that shift is based on a

strong questioning of the Western traditions. Not to deny that in the history of the Western traditions there is a continuum of referencing of the eternal, but in the East it's quite prominent. The eternal is always there. There's a history of this kind of quest. It was done very much by European intellectuals after World War II. People often, especially in North America, don't recognize the importance of WWII to the intellectual heritage of the West. Those moments of Auschwitz and Hiroshima are moments of fantastic horror of what civilization could create. Germany, being one of the great homes of Western culture, creating a civilization that would allow these things to happen, a lot of Western intellectuals, like Romain Rolland and Herman Hesse — and numerous others — started going, 'What's the matter here? There must be a seed in Western culture that's problematic.' I think we're still dealing with that. We live in a society that rarely senses that as being the foundation of the society.

**Progressivism. We're always trying to move forward, away from where we began.**

Away from origin, too, away from time itself. We try to speed up time so that we don't experience the profundity of time.

**Do you prefer to work out of Vancouver, and the Canadian film climate? Is it friendly to a person like yourself who is not making 'Hollywood North' films, not**

**making narrative films?**

To be honest, it's not. My peers are supportive, but the climate itself is not particularly supportive. You feel that as an artist, here in North America, and especially on the west coast, you're not really respected like you would be in Europe, as an example. There's a complete acceptance of that. It's not just for young kids. [The attitude,] 'Oh well, this is just a phase,' [is] a little bit hard to take sometimes. Probably only because I've had the experience where it's not like that. **Do you think that's because of the focus in North America on the commercial and on marketable things as opposed to the intellectual and artistic for their own sake?**

It also has to do with the lack of living culture, the lack of integration between social consciousness and political consciousness and artistic consciousness. They aren't seen as one continuum. There's a real fracture within our society between those people who are creative, who use their creative mind, and those people who are basically functionaries. You don't have that relationship between politics and culture. I love and respect this

place, but I've also been upset about the direction it's been taking. It doesn't seem to have the ideals that it once had. That's a bit of a problem about Vancouver, for me, but maybe it will rejuvenate itself again.

*Building Heaven, Remembering Earth:*

*Confessions of a Fallen Architect* has recently been accepted for the International Competition of the Graz Biennial on Media + Architecture. Hopefully, the film will make a regular-run return to Vancouver screens, but it is probably more likely that Canadians will next have the opportunity to experience its beauty and engaging complexity on the small screen, via video or television. If there are any true minds in Canadian film distribution, we'll be scraping the top of the barrel soon. •