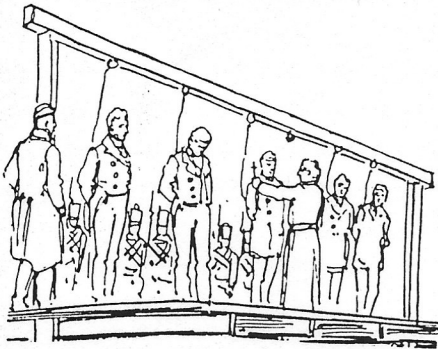


PARADOXICAL ANOMALIES

Oliver Hockenhull discusses his latest feature, *Entre La Langue et L'Océan*: sources of inspiration, personal history, language, and the state of the nation.



"To declare the world as historical is to assume that it can be treated in narrative terms." -- Jean-Francois Lyotard

ALEX: Where did the idea for this film stem from?

HOCKENHULL: I discovered by chance a French Canadian's journal in a half price book bin and was immediately intrigued by the story of a Canadian who was exiled to Australia in the 1830s. I remembered vaguely, as a child, my parents talking about this Canadian Revolution that happened once upon a time. It seems that my Great Grandmother had been a witness to some of the events and my father had donated to some museum or other in Montreal the desk on which a British General had written a decree that 'authorized' the destruction of some French Canadian villages. As I continued to research the history of this failed Canadian Revolution and its aftermath I realized it was a crucially defining event for the Canadian psyche. I saw that these exiles could be a lens through which a telling film could be made concerning the present political and social situation in Canada. As well I made the work for personal reasons. My mother is French Canadian, I was interested in exploring, relating to that particular heritage.

A: Do you feel the film refers specifically

Interview by
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to your personal history or to a more general history?

H: . There are layers in the film which encompass hidden references and meaning for me personally. When I look at the work I recognize recent past relationships I've had, as well as spiritual and political involvements. Some people have told me that they find the work too historically based and not personal enough, others have said the opposite. I believe the work to be operating on both levels concurrently.

A: There are common stylistic threads when we compare your last feature, *Determinations*, with *Entre La Langue et l'Océan*. Is this a personal style or is it related to the subject matter being addressed in each film?

H: Both works are paratactical in form: the connecting clauses between sequences are implied not explicit. The similarity between the two films is based more on the subject matters and to tell the truth, an impatience with the medium, than the stubborn nature of auteur stylistics. I have not made so many films to have been allowed to develop a style, though certain aesthetics and interests can be discerned in an embryonic condition.

A: Did you limit yourself with respect to the length of the film?

H: I believe at this point that the film



should have been much longer. To explicate certain threads. Of course certain other scenes could have been shorter. But with the material I ended up with, I just cut it the way I wanted to cut it, and that happened to fit into the 90 minute convention.

A: One of the devices you use in the film is a front screen with various slides projected onto it and live action taking place in the foreground. It seemed to me to be an ironic take on government sponsored museums and that whole institutional representation.

H: That's an insightful comment because in some ways, by foregrounding the background -- be it historical documents, paintings, etc. -- there is an institutional tone that is being introduced; a kind of authoritarianism. Then the film "plays" in front of it, commenting and referring to it; giving it new meaning. The political is worked on in this film by a technique of referencing the debris of history within a Canadian radical and philosophical context. It is constantly translating, and abstracting these markings so that the possibility of the collective becomes evident. If I had more resources to call upon, I certainly would have used motion and text more prominently: text over image, and as backdrop, but mostly for financial reasons this didn't happen. This resulted in a rather austere film. A film that is quite up front in its artifice.

A: There is a tendency in politically engaged visual arts today to incorporate text with image. I'm speaking here more of canvas or still photo works, but also video.

This might imply an inability of the image to speak for itself due to its specific political nature, or the necessity of visuals to enhance the spoken or the written. Does your work fit into that scheme?

H: I think it does, however the text use in the film is much more poetically ambiguous and multifaceted than the usual political commentary. Also you've got the play with the French and

English texts shifting, as well as the subtitles, which causes a doubling of sorts. It renders apparent the ambiguity implied by language itself, and that allows for play and movement. I think that the most important element in my work, and in my life generally, is to allow for this play and movement.

A: Language is obviously a focal point in the film, sliding from English as the dominant voice to French, and back, with the subtitles following a similar pattern. Sometimes the translations don't quite match or the film plays with our expectations of these translations. What is your feeling on the diversionary aspect of subtitles -- the way that they remove our attention from the image-- and do you consciously play with this characteristic or is it a simple necessity?

H: The film was originally conceived with subtitling and intertitles in mind. The textual material - the intertitles, and the subtitles, were never simply an add on, or a fall back decision but a very consciously applied construction. Much of the film, after all, derives its inspiration from one man's journal. There are sequences in the film in which we see the lead character writing. I have just recently come to realize how demanding the work is for some people. I am guilty of occasionally wishing to forget that most people don't read at all. And so, yes, for many people reading is a chore and they will find this last work difficult to

digest. However, I also believe that the cinematography in the work, the lush colours and ambience, can be enjoyed for their own sake. In other words the work works without words too.



A: In both your features, politically charged moments or events are used as a springboard to examine a whole range of other concerns: the language of cinema, communication theory, human interaction, philosophical considerations, etc. To what degree are the initial concerns (i.e. The

Squamish Five in *Determinations* and the revolution of 1837-38 in *Entre La Langue et L'Océan* just a starting point?

H: Historically crucial moments are psychically charged constellations of energy that pervade our lives, our culture. Scars in time, that maybe are consciously forgotten but remain visible to anyone willing to look. Nothing is resolved, everything is interconnected...One of the most interesting thing I ever read about the French Revolution was one of the partisans first acts was to shoot out the steeple clocks. That kind of destruction is pure desire. Everything new, time collapsed in a single moment, a kaleidoscope of past/future, bound by despair and everything as an exploding hope.

A: In a recent interview, Todd Haynes, the director of *Poison* referred to a comment

James Baldwin once made: a victim who can articulate his experiences as a victim is no longer a victim, but rather a threat. Do you see the central character of Lepailleur in your film as a threat or is the film itself the threat?

H: If we are defining threat as confrontational or questioning, then yes, the character and the film manifests itself as such. Furthermore, the articulation of threat in the film, both in it's subject matters and in formal structure, is with language and ideology, essentials of our understandings of self. The film risks the viewer's usual subjective positioning by demanding the co-production of meaning in reference to well defined, but branching contexts. The work is also a threat to the idea that film is a purchase: you pays your money and you gets your rush, a trip down entertainment lane.

A: The film deals with the deceptions inherent in images, text and language and the unavoidable interpretation and therefore alteration of history through these modes. Though your work is conscious of this, do you see it as being a victim of the same problems?

H: There is always and only interpretation and then you feel the actual of paying the rent. Certainly how the film will be interpreted or not will be faced with the same problems. As you are well aware, the film requires attention, and if it is not given

that, it will be lost like the events that are dealt with in the film are lost within a conservative written history. The film did not receive a review good or bad in any Canadian paper at its premiere. There has been no observance of it at all within what little critical community exists. You know in Sweden, they have over 3 film magazines that come out every



2 months that cover developments in Swedish and international cinema. That is with a population of 8 million people. As it stands now Canada does not have one

national critical film journal. The last one, *The Independent Eye* out of Toronto is now defunct. The larger issue is, as in the film, is this nation a lost cause? And if it is, how did it come about? Can anything be done?

We need to reexamine what it means to be situated in this historical juncture of place and time in reference to other countries and to imperial power and economy. And what does it mean to be a marginal? Historically Canadians have always positioned themselves as victims in one way or another. Power changes, it is morphogenic: it moves. Trying to relate to that in a creative manner is the key. What we have now is a fragmented culture, interest groups vying with one another for a piece of action. Is it reactionary or nostalgic to argue for a united and progressive politics and society? Or are we playing into the hands of the Right by not developing and forefronting the idea of common cause?

A: Did your financial limitations compromise the film in any way?

H: Absolutely. I didn't get my tightrope walker, among other things.

A: How much of a consideration did you have for your audience?

H: An audience is very important to me, and I think about them as the work is in progress. Though there's no pandering to them at all, I'll go through test screenings before the final cut to make sure certain points are brought out clearly for a full understanding of the film. It is a complicated film, and there is no compromise within that complication.

A: Peter Greenaway came to mind when I watched this film. The visual richness and density of the mise-en-scene, as well as the music which was reminiscent of Michael Nyman's. How much of an influence is Greenaway in your work?

H: This last film had already been scripted and designed before *Cook, Thief* came out...I wasn't going to change my intent or vision because of similarities between works. Greenaway is an influence, but then so are Straub/Huillet and many others. People can easily understand Greenaway as there is a familiarity to his narratives. In a Straub/Huillet film you have to situate yourself within a different paradigm to watch the film. If you don't, then you're

not going to understand what is going on at all. His films develop a different language of cinema. In *Entre La Langue et L'Océan* the structure of the film, the way scenes



follow one another and what those scenes mean in reference to every other scene, is formally what is innovative in the film, if you will, as opposed to the cinematographic techniques. The structure itself and the rhythm and layout of that structure in reference to the material gives you a focal point to its interpretation. When you see a Straub/Huillet film, there is the same necessity to understand the formal intentions of the editing pattern to fully appreciate the work.

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A: Do you find that there is a conscious struggle on your part to veer away from the conventional modes of cinematic structure, or is it natural for you?

H: We are always working in narrative, but it depends on what angle we choose, the decision we make of how to tell the story we have to tell. There is definitely a self-

consciousness about it. Hollywood self-consciously creates its movies -- they are made for profit. The self-consciousness in these last two films is evident -- I want to communicate and engage the audience through dramatic, comedic, rhetoric and other tropes to think with me about a situation or event. I am not making intellectual, semiotic tractor school audio visual homework for people. There is a strong emotional element to these films. *Determinations* was very emotionally effective for some people. The last film, people at the premiere laughed out loud for the first twenty minutes or so. Then they realized that it wasn't going to be a string of one liners, but also a heavy piece... I think they plugged

into that when the cut off horse's head was shown.

A: Do you wish to make films that are accessible to a larger audience?

H: There is no shame in being popular. I wouldn't mind being able to reach a larger audience at all. I like the idea of a mass form, and I like movies. But I don't want to make movies just to make movies. If you spend one, two, three years of your life on a project -- I mean I just would never want to waste my time on fluff that is strictly designed so that an audience can waste its time even if it's a boffo box-office success. There is a marketing aspect to films and the market is very trend-oriented and owned pretty much by a cartel that excludes the kind of films that so far I have managed to produce and direct. The last film is no doubt anachronistic in many ways. I'm not pushing the popular buttons of either the mass market or of the politically correct, and then again, the film is insistent on demanding your full attention and your ability to be self-reflexive of what happens on the screen. I didn't realize until recently how extreme and intellectually obsessed this last film really is. Also to examine Canadian history, how uncool. Paradoxically the manner of presentation of the film is radical, it deals with root causes... There is a section in the film where a woman is reading from Lepailleur's diary where he is describing his wonder at seeing a sea horse for the first time... The head of a horse and the curled tail of a fish... An anomaly, the bizarre, and the actuality of life. I love anomalies and paradoxes. What can I say? I have been fortunate to create a paradoxical anomaly. I think it is true to life.