Trois bandes vidéo de Noël Harding et la narration par illusion visuelle

Three Videotapes by Noel Harding and the Visual Illusion of Narrative

Eric Cameron

Volume 22, Number 87, Summer 1977

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/54911ac

See table of contents

Publisher(s)
La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN
0042-5435 (print)
1923-3183 (digital)

Cite this article
Trois bandes vidéo de Noël Harding et la narration par illusion visuelle

Avant de se consacrer à la vidéo, Noel Harding a été opérateur de télévision, et un certain nombre de ses premières œuvres apparaissent comme un résumé de l'art de la production télévisée. Les effets obtenus par le jeu de la caméra et l'enregistrement du son, qui agrémentent l'ambiance, l'accent et le rythme, sont isolés du contexte habituel que fournissent le contenu documentaire ou dramatique et acquièrent une indépendance de structure que la présence coordonnatrice de la caméra nous permet de discerner. Trois vidéos de 1973, *Kathy's Room, Clouds* et *Table and Chairs* — probablement parmi les meilleurs de la production de la caméra — présentent une solution structurale commune: la caméra, installée dans une position fixe, tourne autour de son champ d'opération et le scrute afin d'y découvrir le détail piquant ou touchant. Cette formule atteint la perfection si, à l'immobilité du point de prise de vue, l'on ajoute la régularité et la répétition des mouvements de l'appareil, mais le succès dépend de réactions plus subtiles à l'égard de situations bien caractérisées.

L'œuvre la plus ancienne et, en même temps, la plus complexe nous est offerte par *Kathy's Room*. Au début, la caméra est placée au centre de la chambre et tourne autour d'elle. La mise en place des objets présente une certaine étrangeté et est marquée par un goût juvénile pour le dépouillement qui pourrait bien être qu'une réaction audacieuse contre le manque de noblesse de l'art de la production télévisée. A cause de sa position centrale, la caméra ne peut jamais saisir qu'un détail isolé, et il en résulte aussitôt des vides neutralisants de même qu'une exagération des intentions à cause de l'impression de claustration produite par le cadrage du contenu de la chambre. L'emploi du zoom amplifie ensuite cet effet. A travers une fenêtre, la caméra observe dans le lointain des branches d'arbres dénudées, mais le plan focal est ramené à la fenêtre, ce qui devient maintenant une barrière impénétrable. Le plan change de nouveau, et tout se brouille. Quand les arbres sont au foyer, les petits-bois des battants de la fenêtre se perdent dans le néant. Tout cela nous indique qu'un bouton de réglage de la caméra a été tourné, mais chaque phase pourrait indépendamment traduire un état de tension psychologique, introduire le point critique d'un drame qui n'est jamais précisé. Ensuite, le chien de Kathy fait son apparition — puis, Kathy elle-même, debout, qu'on aperçoit par la porte ouverte, ou assise dans l'ombre du soir qui s'allonge sur le cadre de la fenêtre.

Le son joue un rôle important. Le tic-tac cadencé d'un métronome couvre les bruits légers et intermittents de la chambre, le froissement des câbles de la caméra elle-même, le dialogue étouffé et les paroles indistinctes de Kathy, une sonnerie de téléphone qui cause un tournoiement hors foyer de la caméra.

Tout au long de l'œuvre, règne un extraordinaire sentiment de passage du temps et de sa signification humaine, mais il n’y a pas d'intrigue; seulement une allusion continue à des potentialités narratives imminentes qui ne se matérialisent jamais en une action suivie. Pendant que la noirceur tombe, les lumières sont allumées et éteintes à plusieurs reprises; le ciel de Kathy fait son apparition — puis, Kathy elle-même, debout, qu'on aperçoit par la porte ouverte, ou assise dans l'ombre du soir qui s'allonge sur le cadre de la fenêtre.

Dans d'autres séquences, l'objectif est dirigé directement le long du plafond ou le mur mais donne à voir un écran vide au lieu d'un mur. A cause de sa position dans le lointain des branches d'arbres dénudées, le plan focal est ramené à la fenêtre, qui devient maintenant une barrière impénétrable. Le plan change de nouveau, et tout se brouille. Quand les arbres sont au foyer, les petits-bois des battants de la fenêtre se perdent dans le néant. Tout cela nous indique qu'un bouton de réglage de la caméra a été tourné, mais chaque phase pourrait indépendamment traduire un état de tension psychologique, introduire le point critique d'un drame qui n’est jamais précisé. Ensuite, le chien de Kathy fait son apparition — puis, Kathy elle-même, debout, qu’on aperçoit par la porte ouverte, ou assise dans l’ombre du soir qui s’allonge sur le cadre de la fenêtre.

Tous au long de l’œuvre, règne un extraordinaire sentiment de passage du temps et de sa signification humaine, mais il n’y a pas d’intrigue; seulement une allusion continue à des potentialités narratives imminentes qui ne se matérialisent jamais en une action suivie. Pendant que la noirceur tombe, les lumières sont allumées et éteintes à plusieurs reprises; le ciel de Kathy fait son apparition — puis, Kathy elle-même, debout, qu’on aperçoit par la porte ouverte, ou assise dans l’ombre du soir qui s’allonge sur le cadre de la fenêtre.

Tout au long de l’œuvre, règne un extraordinaire sentiment de passage du temps et de sa signification humaine, mais il n’y a pas d’intrigue; seulement une allusion continue à des potentialités narratives imminentes qui ne se matérialisent jamais en une action suivie. Pendant que la noirceur tombe, les lumières sont allumées et éteintes à plusieurs reprises; le ciel de Kathy fait son apparition — puis, Kathy elle-même, debout, qu’on aperçoit par la porte ouverte, ou assise dans l’ombre du soir qui s’allonge sur le cadre de la fenêtre.

Tout au long de l’œuvre, règne un extraordinaire sentiment de passage du temps et de sa signification humaine, mais il n’y a pas d’intrigue; seulement une allusion continue à des potentialités narratives imminentes qui ne se matérialisent jamais en une action suivie. Pendant que la noirceur tombe, les lumières sont allumées et éteintes à plusieurs reprises; le ciel de Kathy fait son apparition — puis, Kathy elle-même, debout, qu’on aperçoit par la porte ouverte, ou assise dans l’ombre du soir qui s’allonge sur le cadre de la fenêtre.

Tout au long de l’œuvre, règne un extraordinaire sentiment de passage du temps et de sa signification humaine, mais il n’y a pas d’intrigue; seulement une allusion continue à des potentialités narratives imminentes qui ne se matérialisent jamais en une action suivie. Pendant que la noirceur tombe, les lumières sont allumées et éteintes à plusieurs reprises; le ciel de Kathy fait son apparition — puis, Kathy elle-même, debout, qu’on aperçoit par la porte ouverte, ou assise dans l’ombre du soir qui s’allonge sur le cadre de la fenêtre.

Tout au long de l’œuvre, règne un extraordinaire sentiment de passage du temps et de sa signification humaine, mais il n’y a pas d’intrigue; seulement une allusion continue à des potentialités narratives imminentes qui ne se matérialisent jamais en une action suivie. Pendant que la noirceur tombe, les lumières sont allumées et éteintes à plusieurs reprises; le ciel de Kathy fait son apparition — puis, Kathy elle-même, debout, qu’on aperçoit par la porte ouverte, ou assise dans l’ombre du soir qui s’allonge sur le cadre de la fenêtre.
For Beckett, the darkness is come again, and the dream of creation is an obscene joke, the permanent separation of an infinite being in time and space from the disgusting reality, surpassing the death of the body.

"I once knew a madman," says Hamm to Clov in *Endgame*, "who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand, and drag him to the window. Look, there. All that rising corn. And then... Look, the sails of the herring fleet. All that loneliness. He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes."

The writer moves towards a final, ruthless vision, a void of humanity, yet, granted the words: of Christianity. And ownership warps and distorts, and time and space from the disgustingly real, surrounding the absurdity of suffering.

"And the creations themselves, the herring fleet. All that loveliness. He'd appear in the past ten years, set beside the Salmonier River house which I have visited on and off for the last thirty years, in an uncharacteristic environment —

Clouds centres on the most outrageously sentimental of television fantasies, the pretty girl in a sunny summer afternoon-in-the-garden landscape seen through the dark silhouettes of the herring fleet. All that loveliness. He'd appear in the past ten years, set beside the Salmonier River house which I have visited on and off for the last thirty years, in an uncharacteristic environment. It is a very rare room, with plain white walls and ceiling — and that is crucially important. As the camera slowly sways up into a corner, the tedium of confrontation (even a sense of platonic double) is broken by a small clock on the wall. And the process illustrates the whole process of television production. Those effects of order. It's a dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the dust."

"I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the dust." (*Endgame*).

I make these comments because perhaps in Beckett more than any other artist, in any form, one can find at times a parallel vision in the work of Christopher Pratt.

To return to the paintings. That Greek sea, that Aegean sky are the genesis from which creation springs. And the creations themselves, timeless and abstract, stand on the rim of time, perfect, yet unhindered, a vision of order unearthed by the indignity of death. But having made the comparison I now have to undo it to some extent for, whereas in the the Theatre Beckett's characters, having articulated their bleak vision, leave us with nothing save a bleak and perfect abstraction, is also present. Perhaps nowhere is this more manifest than in the Sheep, and Parish Hall. The sheep is a dirty and rather unintelligent beast whose principal image is as a rather confused symbol of Christianity. And ownership walls and confuses buildings; they lose their identity as structures and become symbols of people and their subsequent history. But if one could bring them back to our consciousness in an Eden state, to bring them to us, in Dylan Thomas' words:

"[as] it must have been after the birth of the first sinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm out of the whining green stable on to the fields of praise." (*Fern Hill*),

then, surely, the possibility of renewal, and not a bleak and perfect abstraction, is also present. If one could bring them back to our consciousness in an Eden state, to bring them to us, in Dylan Thomas' words:

"[as] it must have been after the birth of the first sinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm out of the whining green stable on to the fields of praise." (*Fern Hill*),

then, surely, the possibility of renewal, and not a bleak and perfect abstraction, is also present.

As a friend and fellow artist I marvel, and am full of joy. Life, not death is the proper business of art, and in his continued drive for the encyclopaedic path of perfection, Christopher Pratt celebrates it.

### THREE VIDEOTAPES BY NOEL HARDING AND THE VISUAL ILLUSION OF NARRATIVE

**BY Eric CAMERON**

Noel Harding was a television camera-man before he was a video artist, and a group of early works emerge as an abstraction of the craft of television production. Those effects of order. It's a dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the dust."

"I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the dust." (*Endgame*).

I make these comments because perhaps in Beckett more than any other artist, in any form, one can find at times a parallel vision in the work of Christopher Pratt.

To return to the paintings. That Greek sea, that Aegean sky are the genesis from which creation springs. And the creations themselves, timeless and abstract, stand on the rim of time, perfect, yet unhindered, a vision of order unearthed by the indignity of death. But having made the comparison I now have to undo it to some extent for, whereas in the the Theatre Beckett's characters, having articulated their bleak vision, leave us with nothing save a bleak and perfect abstraction, is also present. Perhaps nowhere is this more manifest than in the Sheep, and Parish Hall. The sheep is a dirty and rather unintelligent beast whose principal image is as a rather confused symbol of Christianity. And ownership walls and confuses buildings; they lose their identity as structures and become symbols of people and their subsequent history. But if one could bring them back to our consciousness in an Eden state, to bring them to us, in Dylan Thomas' words:

"[as] it must have been after the birth of the first sinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm out of the whining green stable on to the fields of praise." (*Fern Hill*),

then, surely, the possibility of renewal, and not a bleak and perfect abstraction, is also present. If one could bring them back to our consciousness in an Eden state, to bring them to us, in Dylan Thomas' words:

"[as] it must have been after the birth of the first sinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm out of the whining green stable on to the fields of praise." (*Fern Hill*),

then, surely, the possibility of renewal, and not a bleak and perfect abstraction, is also present.

As a friend and fellow artist I marvel, and am full of joy. Life, not death is the proper business of art, and in his continued drive for the encyclopaedic path of perfection, Christopher Pratt celebrates it.
arms outstretched towards us, but at the last minute, she would turn aside and embrace a Volkswagen truck. The girl in Clouds just keeps on coming, until her face, as large as life, completely fills the screen.

She just stands there, available to our gaze and the projections of erotic imagination. No one else is about. Eventually she says "I love you", but we have to read the words on her lips; the microphone is placed far away, collected on its own, among the birds chirping, distant traffic and a neighbour's lawn-mower. We continue to read the words in the musculature of her abdomen as the camera pans right down to her feet. Twice she appears in different dress; in one episode she lets her hair down loosely about her shoulders.

The clouds are real enough to tinge the summer joy with melancholy (at times the camera looks directly up at them) but they forbid no great tragedy. As they pass overhead, the light changes and so the mood. As the girl approaches from a different angle, so the illumination of her features varies, as does the emotional connotation of the image. Her expression seems to change too. Once, she is unable to say "I love you" with a straight face and bursts out laughing — in silence. The totality is a medley of male-oriented tele-voyeurism. One can have whichever way flatters the male ego: the girl's body completely clothed (as if it were a joke) or with sweet nostalgic sadness.

Table and Chairs is simpler and also more stark. It is more regular than either Clouds or Kathy's Room, and its one actor is male. If Kathy's room was plain, the setting here is raw: a rough wooden table, two wooden chairs and one solitary pear placed in the centre of the table that serves the technical function of a visual stop to the camera as it pans repeatedly from side to side.

Two chairs placed at the table bespeak a social situation. When the camera moves from one to the other it creates a dialogue even in the absence of people. The one actor, when he does appear, is a good match for the room. Overweight, hairy, stripped to the waist, with rolls of fat protruding over his trousers, he sits on one chair; then moves to the other — and back and forth several times before departing. The images are not symmetrical. Sitting in one chair the actor at the left, he is seen more full-face and acquires a distinctly different attitude. He does not say a word; the inference of a conversation is left entirely to the machine.

The cracking of a wood fire and the actor's heavy movements provide the only sounds.

Technically these works are highly professional and there are some beautiful images and effects along the way. There is no denying their accomplishment at their own level; the location of that level might be open to question. Noel Harding's experience as a television cameraman was with the University of Guelph's Audio-Visual Services, not with commercial television. In fact, he rarely even watches television, yet these pieces are pervaded with a romanticism that indicates the anchorage of camera strategies to the expressive ambitions of television.

If Table and Chairs represents a reaction against the sameness of style, Tholos, its exaggerated sense of desolation marks the reverse side of the same emotional attitude. Subsequent works progress by similar inversions of position that yet leave them not very far away. The very qualities of the early works seem to entail liabilities that may be slow to overcome. In the meantime, Kathy's Room, Clouds, and Table and Chairs remain a highly distinctive contribution to video art.

### GERALD BUDNER AND THE FILM ON ART

By René ROZON

The goal of the National Film Board is to bring a living image of Canada to Canadians and to the world. (John Grierson, founder and first commissioner of the NFB.)

Versatile and dynamic, Gerald Budner is a painter, decorator, costumer, historian and restorer of buildings in Montreal, Toronto and Upper Canada Village. The democratization of art? Not only does he believe in it, but he also practises it. Formerly, at the Educational Services Department of the Art Gallery of Toronto, his natal city, he was inspired by Arthur Lismer's theories as set forth in Education Through Art, aiming to make art accessible to everyone. Later, he was to pursue this line of thought in his films. For him it is also a film producer. How did he arrive at the film on art? Gerald Budner reveals the sequence of events.

Gerald Budner — Sur le pont d'Avignon (Jean-Paul Ladouceur and Wolf Koenig, 1951), from the folk song, is a film mimed by marionettes without strings. Punch and Judy, that I created for the National Film Board. They had requested my collaboration on account of my knowledge of the history of medieval art. So the figures in the frescoes at the Palace of the Popes in Avignon were my models. One thing led to another. One day Robert Verral, who was working on the NFB, asked me to collaborate on his film, A Is for Architecture (1959). It was important to sensitize people to our historical and cultural heritage that had to be put into perspective with relation to the present. This is a universal theme, judging by the different versions that later appeared — Danish, Swedish, Finnish, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Polish and Japanese. For this film, I had to plunge into historical research, which interested me tremendously — Verral had chosen for that — and condense 5000 years of world architecture into thirty minutes.

RENÉ ROZON — With the exception of the two sequences on Montreal, made live at the beginning and the end of the filming, the whole picture uses animation techniques. Why is that?

G.B. — The varied nature of the documents — photographs, drawings, engravings, etc. — raised a problem: because after assembling the information we were faced with a real hotch-potch. How were we to make the material fit to be seen? For greater coherence, we had to achieve a uniform perspective — that is why Verral and I adapted the visual material by creating our own drawings. I love cities and their peculiarities. I feel a genuine pleasure in wandering through their streets. To feel the past in a city is an intoxicating experience. This is what I wanted to convey in this film.

R.R. — From architecture you went to the pictorial domain.

G.B. — That is true. We were involved at first in a collaboration with Jean Palardy for his film Corelou (1959), focusing on Orazio Leduc's pictures. Confident on account of this first experience, I felt ready to attack a subject dear to my heart, The World of David Milne (1963).

R.R. — An unexpected choice, but a discerning one. Because your film was to contribute to rehabilitating in the eyes of the public this artist who had been written out of history.

G.B. — Unfortunatley, he has always been unappreciated because he was too far ahead of his time, and rejected during his lifetime by society, including the Group of Seven, not having the support of their patron, Dr. James McCallum. And how poorly he isrepresented in our public collections! Only a small group supported him, among whom were Douglas Duncan and Vincent Massey. Now some of his admirers were my friends. It was they who supplied me with the material for my film. Of the 800 works examined, 120 pictures and water-colours were selected for their filmmaking qualities.

R.R. — And was it at that time that you developed your own conception of the film on art?

G.B. — Inevitably, since I was obliged to eliminate works that I greatly love. In this work, one must never lose sight of the idea that the transposing of works of art to the cinema can engender a new work of art on film. To attain this, it is necessary to respect filming reasons, which demands special framing and a coherence of style, because the diversity of subjects, colours and proportions of works by one artist can break the continuity. It is also necessary to take care not to confuse the spectator who must identify the film. Find his own way in it, and for this his interest must be sustained during the whole length of the projection. For all these reasons, we must look very closely at each of the film's elements. Finally, the film on art must be a pleasant experience, an enjoyable experience, which in no way prevents it from being educational at the same time. Conscious of the fundamental interaction between the spectator and the filmed reality, I hope to reconcile these two poles.

R.R. — After this film on one of our great contemporary artists, you went back in time to 15th century Canada, to commission from the National Gallery of Canada?

G.B. — Yes, to complete the exhibition organized by the Art of the Court in France and in England, 1259-1328. They had imported everything for this exhibition: stained glass windows, fabrics, illuminations, gold and silver plate. Everything was that good that even the illness it was not transportable! This was the reason for the film, with St. Urban in Troyes (Yves Leduc, 1972) for France. Before undertaking this project I had to finish the animation of the films on Léonard Forest's Acadia. For England and France, after this I was asked to make a film on Canadian art, because I wanted to illustrate the film with the most beautiful illuminations of the period. I drew material from the illuminated MS of Matthew of Paris, who had worked in England. I had also used illuminations by this artist before, to illustrate the medieval manuscripts of The Idea of the City. According to Lewis Mumford, (Léonard Forest, 1963). From Matthew of Paris I kept two aspects: the illustrations showing everyday life in the Middle Ages and the techniques of building a cathedral.

R.R. — This did not prevent you from giving us a portrait of the present cathedral at Exeter.

G.B. — This was because at the beginning the film had to be instructive. But upon visiting the