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Three Videotapes by Noel Harding and the Visual Illusion of Narrative

Eric Cameron
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Avant de se consacrer à la vidéo, Noël 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 fournirait le contenu documentaire ou dramatique et acquièrent une indépendance de structure que la présence coordinatrice 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 l'année — 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 regularité 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 n'être qu'une réaction audacieuse contre le manque de fonds du à la jeunesse: une seule plante dans un pot, moulures bien éclairées, se détachant en relief, d'une surface neutre de la nuit approchante: les modes d'expression humaine, mais il n'y a pas d'intrigue; seulement une allusion continue à des potentiels narratives imminentes qui ne se matérialisent jamais en une action. Pendant que la noirceur tombe, les lumières sont allumées et éteintes à plusieurs reprises, mais recouvert de draps et de taies d'oreiller tout froissés. Aucun rideau. Dans l'ensemble, la pièce est très dépouillée, les murs et le plafond, blancs et nus — ce qui est capital. Lorsque l'objectif s'élève brusquement jusqu'au coin du plafond, il arrive qu'une impression de confinement pénible (et même de désespoir) se produise: mais, pendant que la caméra tourne, le simple point de rencontre du mur et du plafond refuse d'accuser les trois dimensions et se transforme momentanément en un motif de formes planes qui basculent, de gauche à droite, vers l'angle adjacent — et reprennent une apparence pleinement tridimensionnelle.

Dans d'autres séquences, l'objectif est dirigé directement vers le plafond ou le mur mais donne à voir un écran vide au lieu d'un mur. A cause de sa position centrale, la caméra ne peut jamais saisir qu'un détail isolé, et il en résulte aussi si le des vides neutralisants de même qu'une exagération des intentions à cause de l'implication de claustrophobie 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, 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 noircâtre tombe, les lumières sont allumées en même temps qu'est mis en action le dispositif électronique antifading qui rétablit l'inten­sité lumineuse originale. A la tombée du jour, la clarté incertaine du paysage, aperçue à travers la sombre silhouette de l'armature de la fenêtre, cède la place à des moulures bien éclairées, se détachant en relief, d'une manière également théâtrale, sur la noircêtre grandis­sante de la nuit approchante; les modes d'expression ont la même vigueur mais ils sont contradictoires. Les lumières sont allumées et éteintes à plusieurs reprises; on ne saurait échapper au côté mécanique fondamental de la transformation. Dans d'autres séquences, de brusques passages d'un détail à un autre donnent à...
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 disgustingly real, surrounding him in an uncharacteristic environment — the coordinating presence of the camera itself.

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 there. 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, one void of humanity, yet, granted the nature of death and decay, the logical conclusion to the absurdity of suffering.

"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 Aegean sea, that Aegean sky are the genesis from which creation springs. And the creations themselves, timeless and abstract, stand on the rim of the world, timeless and uninhabited, a vision of order unmodified by the indignity of death and decay. But having made the comparison I now have to undo it to some extent for, whereas in the theatre Beckett's characters, having articulated their bleak vision, leave us with nothing save the muddy stirrings of alternatives that themselves would be doom-laden, Pratt's work brings us, by the nature of the form itself, to his pictures. There was space, order, light, time and place. Newfoundland is an elemental environment, with an elemental history as timeless and abstract, stand on the rim of time, and is embarking on a terrible beauty. The possibilities of a longed-for perfection stand before us as artifacts of the dream of creation is an obscene joke, the apparent paradox.

Perhaps nowhere is this more manifest than in The Sheep, and Parish Hall. The sheep is an dirty and rather unintelligent beast whose principal image is as a rather confused symbol of Christianity. And ownership warps 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:

"If I have laboured to make the point of this apparent paradox — the opposing elements of this artist's singular point of view, it is because, as I said, this has been transformed into an extension of one of his pictures. There was space, order, light, meticulously arranged, abstraction with a living purpose. And later, looking through his most recent work in the airy cell of a studio I considered particularly Cape St. Mary's and Lake Ontario. Perhaps it is too simplistic to suggest that the very concept of light itself, the artist had begun to move towards a clarification of the vision of renewal, but, in Lake Ontario the idea asserts itself with great force.

The cods are all there, the perfect vision of sky and water, and central to it the perfect object, the boat. But drifting from the stack, the vortices of life across the Universe, is a stream of smoke.

I stated earlier that Pratt was an artist of his time and place. Newfoundland is an elemental environment, with an elemental history as timeless and abstract, stand on the rim of the world, and is embarking on another journey which will allow the private poet and the visual artist to fuse and melt into one.

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 encyclical 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 camera work and sound recording that provide embellishments of mood, movement and space are isolated from the habitual context of documentary or dramatic content and achieve a structural self-sufficiency through an awareness of the coordinating presence of the camera itself.

Three tapes from 1973, Kathy's Room, Clouds, and Table and Chairs are probably the best of the early works. The first is a solution; the camera in a single fixed position whence it variously pans and scans its environment, hunting out the poignant or emotive image. Add to the fixed view-point regularity of camera movements and the fact of repetition, and the formula is complete, but resolution dependent on more subtle responses to specific situations.

Kathy's Room is the earliest and also the most complex. The camera sits in the middle, and in the early part of the tape it winds regularly round the room. The setting has a certain oddity about it, a sparse youthful taste that might well be a bold response to youthful lack of funds; a single potted plant that can yet be made to yield a sense of horticultural opulence when the camera fixes tightly on it; against the window in the opposite wall, the date in large bold figures looking more like a road sign than a calendar; pictures leaning against the wall, not hung up; old-fashioned radiators under windows, even a sense of plainer double divan bed without head board or blankets, but with heavily crumpled sheets and pillow-cases. There are no curtains. Generally, it is a very bare room, with plain white walls and ceiling — and that is crucially important. As the camera slowly swings up into a corner, the tedium of cold, smooth, white surfaces, an emptiness of sense; but as it turns, the simple juncture of wall and ceiling refuses to signify in three dimensions and momentarily regresses to a pattern of flat shapes that tip from left to right into the adjoining corner — in full three dimensions again.

In other episodes the camera may point directly at the ceiling or wall, but what we see is not a bare wall, but a bare scene. Because of its position in the centre of the room, the camera is never able to encompass more than a fragment; and this results, at once, in the neutralizing blanks, and also in the sense of overcharged meaning in the claustrophobic framing of the fittings of the room. Later, the use of the zoom-lens exaggerates this effect. The camera peers through a window at the bare branches of distant trees, but then the focus shifts to the surface of the glass that now becomes an impenetrable barrier. The glass window continues to change and all goes hazy. When the trees are clear, the bars of the window frame melt into nothing. The totality tells us that a knob on the camera is being turned, but each stage independently might indicate a state of psychological tension, evoke the crisis of a drama that is never specified. Eventually Kathy's dog appears — and then Kathy, glimpsed through the open door or sitting in the lengthened evening shadow of the window frame.

Sound is important. The regular beat of a metronome overlays the slight and intermittent noises of the room, the cracking of the camera's own cables, the muffled dialogue of Kathy's indistinguishable words, a telephone that rings sending the camera spinning out of focus.

There is an extraordinary sense of time throughout, and of the human significance of its passage, but no plot; just a continued conjuring up of imminent narrative possibilities that never condense about a story line. As darkness closes in, the lights are switched on, along with the 'automatic gain control' which compensates electronically to restore the original light level. The freezing light of an early evening landscape seen through the dark silhouettes grid of the window frame gives way to well-lit moldings in full relief set with equal theatricality against the fuller darkness of approaching nightfall: the moods are equally strong but contradictory. The lights are switched on and off several times, evoking the absence of an anistic basis of the transformation. Elsewhere abrupt cuts from one detail to another suggest a critical turn of fortunes, but in relation to no events in particular. The subject of the piece is implied human situation and incident (replete with several layers of symbolic overtones) but it is not the piece of incident, and, in terms of a purely aesthetic balance of emotional flavours that constitute its ultimate formal values.

Clouds centres on the most outrageously sentimental of television fantasies, the pretty little girl in a sunny summer afternoon-in-the-garden. Sentimental of television fantasies, the pretty little girl in a sunny summer afternoon-in-the-garden.
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, comes out of the frame. "I love you", but we have to read the words on her lips; the microphone is placed far away, and the actor's voice will be heard by our ears. The crackling of a wood fire and the actor's heavy movements provide the only sounds. The totality engenders a new work of art on film. To attain this, it is necessary to respect filming reason. To produce Exeter in a city is an intoxicating experience. This is the goal of the National Film Board: to bring a living image to every Canadian and to the world. (John Grierson, founder and first commissioner of the NFB.)

Gerald Budner — Sur le pont d'Avignon (Jean-Paul Ladouceur and Wolf Koenig, 1951), from the folk song, is a film mimed by marionnettes without strings. Punch and Judys, that I created for the National Film Board. They had requested my co-operation on account of my knowledge of the history of medieval art, and the figures in the frescoes at the Palace of the Popes in Avignon were my models. One thing led to another. One day Robert Verrall, who was working at 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 interests me tremendously — Verrall had chosen me 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 hotchpotch. How were we to make the material fit to be seen? For greater coherence, we had to achieve a uniform style. That is why Verrall 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.

G.B. — From architecture you went to the pictorial domain.

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