

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

Three Videotapes by Noel Harding and the Visual Illusion of Narrative

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Trois bandes vidéo

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 télévisée¹. 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 fournit 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 d'alors — 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 prises 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 n'être qu'une réaction audacieuse contre le manque de fonds dû à la jeunesse: une seule plante dans un pot, à laquelle, pourtant, on communique une apparence d'opulence végétale en centrant directement la caméra sur elle; près de la fenêtre, sur le mur opposé, une date imprimée en gros caractères qui fait penser à un tableau de signalisation plutôt qu'à un calendrier; des tableaux appuyés contre le mur au lieu d'y être accrochés; sous les fenêtres, des radiateurs anciens; un divan-lit double absolument quelconque, sans tête ni couvertures, 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 lentement vers un angle 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 tridimen-

sionnelle.

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 aussitôt des vides neutralisants de même qu'une exagération des intentions à cause de l'impression 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, puis 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.

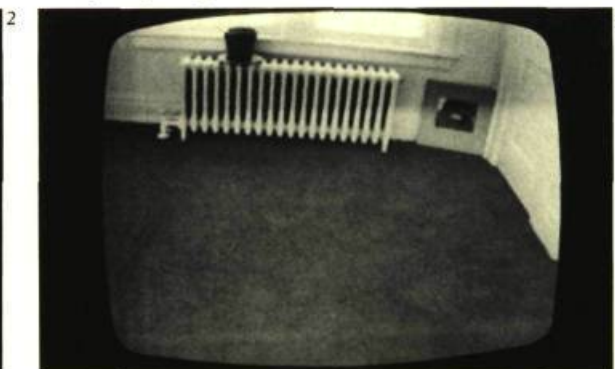
Le son joue un rôle important. Le tic-tac cadencé d'un métronome couvre les bruits légers et intermittents de la chambre, le froissement des câbles de la caméra elle-même, le dialogue étouffé et les paroles indistinctes de Kathy, une sonnerie de téléphone qui cause un tournoiement hors foyer de la caméra.

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 noirceur 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 noirceur 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



de Noël Harding
et la
narration
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Eric Cameron



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 universe.

"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 loveliness. 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 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 uninhabited, a vision of order unsullied 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 a terrible beauty. The possibilities of a longed-for perfection stand before us as artifacts of immense strength and moulding, tangible things to hold up against the implacably destructive will of fate. Or God.

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 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:

"(as) it must have been after the birth of the simple light
in the first spinning place, the spellbound
horses walking warm
out of the whinnying 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.

The sheep is brought to us with all the dignity of its first creation, and the Parish Hall is a temple, waiting for the Priest to confirm it in its ordinance.

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, recently, I have detected an increased emphasis in one direction.

Walking into his house the other day, that house which I have visited on and off for the past ten years, set beside the Salmonier River in an uncharacteristic environment — for the setting is gentle, almost rural in the English sense — I marvelled at how the interior had 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 by the very choice of a lighthouse, 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 codas are all there, the perfect vision of sky and water, and central to it the perfect object, the boat. But drifting from the stack, trailing the smudge 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 turbulent as that of any Greek state. It is not possible for any artist living here to avoid the ancient metaphysical and physical problems of humanity struggling to assert a dependency against a blind and pitiless Universe. Pratt's art has reflected this process, moving from trees crying out for identity into the eye of the storm and its murderous calm, knowing that to move, to create, would bring chaos, but coming out then into the sunlight of *Lake Ontario* — the smudge of smoke. I think the process illustrates that he has rejected the final abstraction, the empty stage 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, accent and pace 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 group and they share a common structural 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 depends 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 underneath the windows; and the plainest 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 confinement (even a sense of desperation) may ensue; 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 screen. 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 neutralising 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 focus 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 creaking 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 potentialities 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 fading light of an early evening landscape seen through the dark silhouetted grid of the window frame gives way to well-lit mouldings 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; there is no escaping the mechanistic basis of the transformation. Elsewhere abrupt cuts from one detail to another suggest a critical turn of fortune, 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 coheres rather at the level of process — 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 girl in a sunny summer afternoon-in-the-garden landscape; from its idyllic recesses, over and over again, she comes towards the camera. There used to be a girl in a television commercial who ran through just such a landscape with

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, collecting its own ready-made mood music of twittering birds, chirping crickets, distant traffic and a neighbour's lawn-mower. We continue to read the words in the muscular contractions 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 forbode 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 it whichever way flatters the male ego most; with deep sincerity, flirtatiously (and almost as 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 poised 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 the chair 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 conversational situation is left entirely to the machine. The crackling 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 sentimentality of *Clouds*, 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 he 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 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)¹. 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 hotch-potch. How were we to make the material fit to be seen? For greater coherence, we had to achieve a uniformity of 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.

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 *Correlieu* (1959), focussing the camera on Ozias Leduc's pictures. Confident on account of this second film 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 was sinking into oblivion.

G. B. — Unfortunately, Milne 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 is represented in our public collections! Only one 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 filming 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 reason, which demands special framing and a coherence of style, because the diversity of subjects, colours and proportions of works by a same artist can break the continuity. It is also necessary to take care not to confuse the spectator who must identify with 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 produce *Exeter* (1972). Was this a commission from the National Gallery of Canada?

G. B. — Yes, to complete the exhibition they organized, *The Art of the Court in France and in England, 1259-1328*². They had imported everything for this exhibition: stained glass windows, fabrics, illuminations, gold and silver plate, etc. As for the monument, thank goodness 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 *Exeter*, I did my research at the British Museum, 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 sequences of *The Ideal 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