

With Hoolboom Animals That Make Pictures: An Interview about Public Lighting

Tomá Tetiva and Petra Veselá

An interview with Canadian experimental filmmaker Mike Hoolboom about his recent work *Public Lighting* and related issues, conducted in October 2004 in the Czech Republic.

Tomá Tetiva: You use many pictures in your movies. How do you choose pictures from the archives – is it rationale choice or intuition?

Mike Hoolboom: I think it's a question of attention. You draw your attention to one part of the image world, or one aspect of the world around you, and events begin to gather around that point. This point could have something to do with sexuality, for instance, and lead you to meeting people who are searching with their bodies. It could provoke coincidences, like when Kenneth Anger was editing his biker movie *Scorpio Rising*. There was a knock on the door and when he opened it a delivery man was waiting with a package. He signed for it, though it was clearly at the wrong place, and found that he had been given a life of Christ, which he promptly and very usefully deployed in his own film. This is how the harnessing of attention works. Is this rational or intuitive? I think it's a question of necessity. What is required for the artist is to take the next step.

The first three chapters of *Public Lighting* feature portraits of cities and individuals at the same time. Each of these cities were gathered in different ways. In the portrait of composer Philip Glass called *Glass*, I divided the movie up into five movements, each of which was fixed in a Manhattan location (Central Park, Brooklyn

Bridge, subway). The movie begins with photographs, frozen moments, and then jumps into motion. It begins with immigrant life in a series of tenement freezes, and slowly moves out (a radial movement) but also upwards (the city builds and grows).

TT: What about the scenes of Madonna in *Hey Madonna*? Has she seen the movie? Why did you put it there?

MH: I don't think she's seen it, though it played yesterday in London. While I'm hardly in a position to ask for her pictures, I feel that they surround me, I don't need to find them. When I look out they are already there, looking back at me. They're already my pictures, part of how I imagine the world (like the tree which grows in front of my building, the newspaper boxes perched on the corner). But as someone who sees pictures, I feel this seeing arrives with some responsibility, not simply to digest, but to pose a question. Why these pictures? How do they work? How are they working on me? How else might they work? The globalization of pictures insists that images and sounds arrive in a one-way flow, they come from the place which has money and fills in the holes between a word and its meaning, or a sound and its feeling. Sometimes it's nice to reverse the flow and talk back.

I resettle these well known pictures, writing over them in an act of audio-visual graffiti, shortening, tightening, setting them into different relations, especially connected to AIDS and death. Her dancers are all young and gay (well, maybe one isn't gay) and the threat of AIDS for them is very real. After seeing a very personal

text scroll about AIDS, when we encounter the brief montage of a young dancer who appears in a series of quick fade-outs, I think it's difficult not to read this as a premonition of his death, that he is making his last stand here. The mainstream, in other words the globalized entertainment industry, has plucked a moment from a fringe subculture (in this instance voguing) and turned it to its own ends. I'm following a similar momentum, extending this gesture, turning this turn, but towards a very different end. I'm not trying to replace the future with commodity fetishes. I'm offering a place to think about pictures, a new frame in which these pictures can be seen.

TT: What do you think about poetry? I see poetry in your movies. Do you like this principle and why did you choose to making movies, not writing?

MH: My heart (a fist wrapped in blood says *Closer*) remains with the Canadian poet Anne Carson. Unlike my relation to movies where I see many different things, I am content to read Carson over and again. There is a line from *Beauty of the Husband* which continues to haunt me, and appears in the prelude of *Public Lighting*: "Every wound gives off its own light." Isn't this cinema? Isn't each movie a silver wound issuing pictures, and don't we arrive at the theatre hoping for a glimpse inside this body?

TT: I can see lyrics in your movies which are like poetry.

MH: The impulse might be the same. Not the story which occasions a feeling, but the story of the feeling. If exposition were set in traditional story frames, characters would be required, the necessity of the next because. Resolutions would be adopted, conclusions arrived at. In poetry one is allowed the documentary luxury of exploring a moment, and releasing it from the burden of connection with every other moment. Jean Perret was telling me yesterday about two kinds of memory, the souvenir and the *mémoire*. The souvenir is the past as it appears in stories, the past which is already a story. The *mémoire* emerges in places like psychoanalysis, or the cinema, a convulsive, eruptive memory which appears as a fragment, a raw bundle. Jean insists that documentary cinema keep a place for these *mémoires*, that the task of a movie isn't simply to bundle its audience through to the end, but to stake these fragments out and let them stand there, as raw and undigested fragments if necessary. These unstoried moments might be akin to the poetry you're after.

Petra Veselá: Is it what you are looking for in your

movies, to reveal these fragments?

MH: Not just a perfect movie, but a perfect audience. I offer a view on pictures, but try to conjure a place where the audience can make own associations. My movies resist absolute closure, hopefully allowing you to dream your own pictures. The aim is not to have my pictures obliterate yours, but to allow both to move together, in a duet. To grant a place for this mystery, for the large place that is you sitting beside me, and you and you. To grant a place so this mystery can circulate, not in order to reveal itself and be known (my movies aren't detective stories: "let's get to the bottom of this") but to co-exist in our independent singularities.

In a traditional movie they talk about suspending disbelief, forgetting yourself, leaving your concerns behind. This is contrary to the cinema I'm interested in, or the life I'm interested in. The cinema is also life, not an escape from it. Sometimes the pictures I make are a little too full, there's too much to see, and I fully expect people will wander off into their own thoughts, or move alongside (watching themselves watching), not always "following" the picture. For a movie to work, it's not necessary to be forever following.

TT: Do you write a screenplay before shooting?

MH: *Public Lighting's* opening movement is a portrait of my friend Esmá who lives in Amsterdam. We explored the city together, hanging out and sharing our lives. This is how the movie developed, a day at a time, a sentence at a time. Amsterdam is a show city, built for tourists, but there are many areas where visitors never arrive, places she hadn't been for a while. We managed to retrace her loops and familiars (inevitable isn't it?) but also to extend them. Each day I made notes of where we'd been and what was shot (very little in each place, often no more than a brief shot, a minute or less), and I forayed out on my own and made some suggestions, though mostly it was a question of being led. I was the visitor in this movie. In the movie (this chapter is calling *Writing*) she speaks as a writer, which she is, and as someone particularly interested in formal qualities (the shape of language, or in the words of the movie "the six types of personality:" people as shapes.) I tried to shoot through glass and plastic and through light, trying to find these shapes, this body and embodiment. This city portrait is always inhabited, always being framed by the body which encounters it, whether with a camera or not.

A note about the six different kinds of personality:

There are a limited number of elements in the world, yet taken in combination they produce a fantastic variety of substances. What I want to offer is a construction zone where these models are appraised, examined, pulled apart, stuffed with pictures then put back into the arena (the frame) for review. How do I look? How do I look at what I am looking at? And in the cinema there is also this question: how do we look? How do we say “we”? At what point exactly does the image on the screen, the life up there on the screen, in the dark, become our life? Us, together.

Is it really possible to say the words, “I love you” for the first time? How many people have said them before? Are they my words or yours? Or our words? At the moment of my most intense singularity, when I am expressing myself, my own desire most fully, I am also saying “We.” “I love you.” “We love you.”

I think we are complicated animals. Animals that make pictures.

TT: How did you like Kiarostami’s *Five* which we watched yesterday [at the festival]? You probably know this kind of movie via Andy Warhol’s work in the sixties, but was it a real movie, joke movie or cult movie? I’m still not sure that I like these long, slow shots – wasn’t it finally too static?

Mike Hoolboom: I’m still digesting. *Five* arrives from minimal art, trying to clean the room of our attentions, to take away the noise of dramatic expectation and even character, so that we might notice some small moment. To notice a small moment can sometimes be a great victory. What’s so risky about Kiarostami’s film is that he asks so much from his viewers, his movie is radically incomplete, he sends his child out into the world without arms, and only half a face. The simplest thing to do as an audience is refuse. “No, sorry, this won’t do at all. This is no movie, and no child.” As an artist he wants to meet us half-way, he doesn’t want to fill the screen, but to present instead a place where an image and spectator might meet. Many will take this as provocation. He offers a small picture, a little bit of sound, and then he asks us to fill in the rest. This is a great risk, and as we saw by the response of the many who walked out, it doesn’t work for those who retain the expectations of theatre.

For myself I felt the pernicious accompaniment of small questions, moments of yesterday and the day before, the small anxieties which take the place of thought. I am watching them rise up because the movie

isn’t “taking me away.” Instead, the movie allows a place where I can see the noise I create, and understand that it is exactly to escape this noise (which at other times I like to call myself) that I go to the movies. There is a word we use for this experience: boredom.

I felt the two opening shots (of five) in Kiarostami’s *Five* were unnecessary, but that the last couple were terrific. Once again in the judge’s chair, hiding behind “I like” and “I want.” The final shot (nearly twenty minutes long) draws the audience (those who are left) into the movie in a very physical way. Both screen and theatre are black, and we are surrounded by the sound, as we would be “in life.” We are offered a chance to listen to the frogs singing to one another, and the birds alighting, and the rain storm which clears this chatter, and their return, and then daybreak. (It is also my long night, my day break, Kiarostami offers me only five shots but there is already a journey, a wandering and homecoming, in a word, transcendence.) How much image or life do you need? How much life do we give up when we see a picture (and when do we stop seeing them?) Hard questions from a hard film.

TT: Do you like punk?

MH: Once upon a time. Now I like spare music, I don’t need so many notes, I prefer to hear the same refrains for a long time, like William Basinski, or the Australian guitarist Oren Ambarchi or the German pop reworker Stephan Mathieu or the Canadian laptopper Tim Hecker. Punk used to provide a place for my anger, now I get angry without accompaniment.

Just before coming here to Jihlava I caught a suite of concerts from the Touch label in Amsterdam. The headliner was Christian Fennesz, whose *Endless Summer* (Mego, 2001) remains a breakthrough marriage of sweet melodics and glitch electronica. But the night we saw him he was completely out of sorts. He always chose the wrong loop, he picked up the guitar which caused great anticipation (so many of these folks sit numbly by their Apple) but his playing was pedestrian, leading nowhere in particular. But even so there were strains and hints of that sweet sound he is so fine at producing. What he was expressing, in a deeply personal way, was a direct transmission of his feeling as he stood there before us. It wasn’t a perfect day and he wasn’t going to dress it up for the concert. Heaven doesn’t happen on the clock, it occurs sometimes, in between moments, maybe when you’re least expecting it. And so these sweet sounds remained as distant memory, a ghost image, haunting the present, the place between us. The

concert was a brilliant demonstration of failure. Live in every sense.

TT: Political issues?

MH: It's a deep concern of course, exaggerated through traveling. To see certain moments of American culture repeated wherever I go is distressing. Everywhere the cinema is occupied, so the Czech cinema is a minority in the Czech Republic, the Canadian cinema is a minority in Canada. As Jean Perret said in the closing ceremony, this festival in Jihlava represents a resistance to corporate looking, it creates a different sense of time, a time of reflection perhaps. And inside this time a different kind of subject may be born.

Public Lighting shows the lives of individuals but not in any direct, expository fashion. To change how we say something means that what we say might also be changed. The mainstream offers us not only certain formalized structures of storytelling (ways to imagine our lives) but certain kinds of lives, again and again.

I'm still looking for way to struggle against the empire. A way to say no. My movies, this festival, are both small gestures, hardly able to effect enormous change. There are many questions I have about small. What is a small thing, and how are these small ideas transmitted? In our speaking today, for instance, can we produce pictures with our words that can take root alongside other people's pictures? Isn't this already a hope, not a utopian beginning, a perfect world, but a hope in the grimy, empire filled world of death that we are actually living in?

It's not only about saying "no." It's also about falling in love. When we fall in love we say "yes." I think this can also be a political act. Though not necessarily, it depends, falling in love can be like saying the word God, just the prelude for murder. But it can also mean something else: a rare and beautiful kindness, a new empathy, invented between two people (but why two? Does love come in pairs? Why not five or nine?).