

Comments at “A Tribute to Peter Harcourt,” by R. Bruce Elder

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In his beautifully written autobiography *A Canadian Journey: Conversations with Time* (1994) Harcourt recounts circumstances under which he came to understand that some Canadian films spoke to him in a special way. He had moved to England to study at Cambridge University. In Cambridge, studying with F. R. Leavis, he encountered a powerful example of commitment to the value of serious art.

Everything Leavis did had enormous moral conviction. I guess that is what made him dangerous in the eyes of the establishment. Like Socrates, he was feared as a corrupter of youth, as someone who, like George Grant in this country, felt the world was going in the wrong direction and that it was the role of education – in Leavis’ case, supremely the study of literature—to maintain the values of a fine seriousness that were slipping away. Hence his literary preferences – his valuation of Jane Austen over Henry Fielding, of George Eliot over Charles Dickens, of D. H. Lawrence over James Joyce. (43)

And further,

From Leavis I learned far more than the value of literature. Selected literary texts were studied seriously in order to talk about the relation of the self to the social, the local to the universal and about the ultimate value of life on earth. Fine writing was less important in itself than as an indication of moral health, both in the individual writer and in society as a whole. Before long, I was to champion similar values within film—initially addressing myself to the great European masters like Renoir, Buñuel and Bergman but eventually to the emergence of Canadian film.

What I gained from Leavis, finally, was something more abstract than specific literary skills. I learned to respect the excitement of intelligence, indeed the *danger* of intelligence, and to recognize the social isolation that can be inflicted upon anyone who approaches the world with exceptional knowledge and with intense moral seriousness. (49)

After taking his master’s degree, he moved to London, enrolling as a part-time doctoral candidate at Birkbeck College and teaching foreign students English. In London, he discovered the National Film Theatre, and it was there he first became aware of the cinema as an art form. He was employed teaching so-called “day-release” students—young people employed in trades but continuing to attend school a day a week until they turned sixteen or met the requirements of the apprenticeship. This led to his working for the British Film Institute (whose importance in opening up questions about film’s place in education and generally in visual education needs to be stressed). He recounts

While still at the BFI, one of my jobs had been to supervise the certification of educational films. If foreign films were deemed educational, they were imported without tax.

Through this activity, I began to see films like the National Film Board—nostalgic films like *Corral* and *City of Gold*; philosophical films like *Universe* and *The Living*

Machine; incisive, “direct cinema” films like *I was a Ninety-Pound Weakling*, *The Days Before Christmas*, *The Back-Breaking Leaf* and the fabulous *Lonely Boy*—a film about the early success of Paul Anka.

These films really excited me. Having been in England for over ten years, I had become accustomed to thinking of myself as a North American—a citizen of the world. These films challenged this esperanto position. Looking at them I said to myself: “These aren’t American films. They’re not British films. They must be *Canadian* films.” From this aspect of self-recognition that these films provided, I wanted to return home.

What these films possessed was a sense of detachment, a reflective tone. They inquired into the meaning of life, while exposing its absurdities. They were the product of a sensibility that looked out at the world without being a part of it. (66–67)

My writings on Canadian documentary have analyzed this sense of detachment, of looking at the world without being part of it. For these Unit B films, I coined the term “observational documentary,” to highlight that the point of view in these films, these very Canadian films, was that of someone who did not feel that he or she is shaping the dynamic of unfolding reality, but rather looking in on its mysteries. I also commented that, reflecting that outsider’s position, these works often pose a problematic that the evidence provided by a photographically based medium—a medium that, seemingly, can do no more than scan the surfaces of reality—cannot adequately resolve. “What is man that a machine is not?”—or even Warren McCullough’s “What is man that he can know number? And what is number that it can be known by man?”—all from *The Thinking Machine*, or *City of Gold*, with its past distanced by the mediation of archival photographs, cannot answer the question “what drove adventurers to face death scaling Chilkoot Pass, when many would not even toil for gold when they arrived at Dawson City?” “What sutures Paul Anka’s audience to the celebrity.” Or, “What is the past of the universe.” The evidence observation offers cannot answer these questions—observation (as opposed to knowledge arising from participation in the underlying dynamic that shapes the surface appearances) cannot answer the questions we long to resolve. The wager of my writing on Canadian documentary was that observation, as distinct from participation, was what made for the radical difference between Canadian and American direct cinema—that accounts for my coining the terms “observational documentary” and “the cinema of presentation.”

Peter regularly presented the time he spent at Cambridge, studying practical criticism with F. R. Leavis, as opening him to understanding his Canadianness. Of course, his courage in speaking on behalf of the all-but-completely unknown cinema of a relatively small country was steeped in the exercises in practical criticism that directed attention to details of a work’s fabrication, rather than received reputations and cultural assumptions. But the details of Peter’s manner of telling that tale—its construction, if you will—in *A Canadian Journal* are telling. He writes of sitting his examinations at the end of his first year at Cambridge. The exercises in practical criticism, he notes, involved being handed “a sheet of unsigned bits of prose or poems that we had to compare and contrast, to evaluate as best we could, to date as closely as possible and to assign an author if we dared. It was a great exercise for drawing attention to the expressive details of style and to the shifting literary conventions of different historical eras” (50).

That year, the end-of-first-year exam, he tells us, offered an Elizabethan sonnet that was “mechanically rhetorical and easy to dismiss as second-rate” and a fairly contemporary lyrical

poem. He confesses that he couldn't identify the author of the sonnet, but he was convinced the poem was second-rate. The lyrical poem, by contrast, was magnificent, "one of the most *perfect* poems in the English language," so striking that he could still quote it from memory:

Why Do I?

C:\poet\thomas-hardy

Why do I go on doing these things?

Why not cease?

Is it that you are yet in this world of welterings

And unease,

And that, while so, mechanic repetitions please?

When shall I leave off doing these things?—

When I hear

You have dropped your dusty cloak and taken your wondrous wings

To another sphere,

Where no pain is: Then shall I hush this dinning gear.

We might note that the poem resembles the Unit B films I have alluded to, in its sense of confronting mysteries that beggar understanding. This epistemological sense, of the mind stretched to the end of its tether, and contemplating mysteries that stretch away into the beyond, where they cannot be pursued by intelligence, is fundamental to Harcourt's understanding of serious, i.e., moral and humane art, with its self-reflexive testing and exposing of the limits of language and artistic form. It is also the source of his belief that Canadian art and film figure prominently in the history of serious art's confrontation with the destitution of the modern, which so often turns its back on mystery.

However, the tale is recounted in *A Canadian Journey* for another reason. After quoting the poem, Peter notes,

I was too ignorant to imagine who might have written it – W. H. Auden? I pathetically speculated—but I knew it was superb. The rhythmic authority of its run-on lines, its command of onomatopoeia and caesura, were virtually Shakespearean. Even the imagery, the "dusty cloak," was reminiscent of *Macbeth*. I was so excited. Not only did I feel I had written a good exam but I had discovered a great poem. (51)

It turns out that an irony motivated these allusions to *the* genius of the English language. In the corridor after the exam, he heard one of his young colleagues talking in their high-falutin' manner: "Fancy putting a Shakespearean sonnet alongside a crummy poem by Thomas Hardy," one expostulated. "How dare they?" another complained. "The fullness of my self-confidence ebbed away and that corrosive Canadian emptiness returned. I didn't know what I do would do if they threw me out," he notes (51). Soon enough, he learned that he alone among students in his class received first-class honours. He states what he learned from the experience, and how it

prepared for his advocacy of Canadian cinema:

One must always be vigilant lest one's cultural assumptions get in the way of one's critical judgment—indeed, of one's intelligence. Later on, in the nineteen-seventies, when I found myself waging war against the increasingly dominant fashion of French film theory, I took solace from that important Cantabridgian event. (51)

A Canadian Journey offers us a social thematic as at least a *partial* explanation for his keen sense of the limits of understanding. Towards the end of the work, and almost as though in summary, he notes that very Hegelian theme that is at the heart of philosopher's Charles Taylor's deeply insightful writings. "In his various examinations of the sources of the self . . . Taylor has written about the need for a 'horizon of meaning' to provide stability and identity, as a means of reciprocal recognition within any given cultural space" (124). He then quotes Taylor,

. . . what is peculiar to a human subject is the ability to ask and answer questions about what really matters, what is of the highest value, what is truly significant, what is most moving, most beautiful, and so on. The conception of identity is the view that outside the horizon provided by some master value or some allegiance or some community membership, I would be crucially crippled, would become unable to ask and answer these questions effectively, and would thus be unable to function as a full human subject. (cited in *Canadian Journey*, 124–125)

A theme of Peter's writing is the destitution of modernity, which has left us collapsed into inadequate and shrunken selves (of the sort he knew only too well and are all too common in the modern, neo-liberal university). Reading *A Canadian Journey* deconstructively, we might connect this theme of the mysteries the mind cannot fathom to the loss of horizon provided by some master value or some allegiance or some community membership. While I don't exactly concur (my understanding of this matter specifically is much more Kantian, in contrast to Peter's very Canadian Hegelianism), I do think that this is the position that Harcourt finally arrived at. Given that, it is completely understandable that the passage quoted from Taylor is followed immediately by these remarks:

It is this inability to function as a full human subject that most insistently speaks to me. It is as much cultural as personal. We live now in a world of an increasing spiritual emptiness. Although not without excitements, the entertainment culture of the United States is the most trivializing the world has ever seen. Far more damaging than the atrocities of Adolf Hitler are the achievements of Walt Disney. He has altered the sensibilities of an entire world with its consent. The inescapable "cuteness" of all entertainment for children now seems without redress. Brought up within the falsification of the Disneyan imagination, the young are denied access to the mysteries of the world. They are held within what Timothy Findley has called a culture of "commercialized immaturity." Especially in North America, Disneythink exists unchallenged. (125)

Of course, we can't but be stunned by Peter's passing, leaving us here in a world that is

unquestionably a bit emptied. The poet who penned the poem that Peter characterized as one of the “most perfect in the English language” gives shape to the hollow feeling, in another poem, “Exeunt Omnes”

I

Everybody else, then, going,
And I still left where the fair was?...
Much have I seen of neighbour loungers
Making a lusty showing,
Each now past all knowing.

II

There is an air of blankness
In the street and the littered spaces;
Thoroughfare, steeple, bridge and highway
Wizen themselves to lankness;
Kennels dribble dankness.

III

Folk all fade. And whither,
As I wait alone where the fair was?
Into the clammy and numbing night-fog
Whence they entered hither.
Soon one more goes thither!