

PHILLIP BARKER AND THE MODEST SPECTACLE OF TRUST

BY Mike Hoolboom

The longest illegal screening in Canadian history is playing even as we speak, between the generitified columns of City TV's new Toronto location on Queen street. Fifteen just slightly larger than life monitors broadcast the station's daily outpourings of local trivia, heavy metal posturings and made for TV consolations. Playing without the sanction of a re-dubbed Ontario Film and Video Review Board (formerly the Ontario Censor Board) this shift from the domestic commonplace to the outdoor spectacle had, for three freezing nights in October, a companion piece, a twin. Entitled *Trust A Boat* by Phillip Barker (film) and Marianna Ebbers (performance) this media mix was installed just beyond the confines of City TV, in a parking lot cleared especially for its audience and the warehouse just behind.

Ros: We're on a boat. (Pause)
Dark, isn't it?
Guil: Not for night.
Ros: No, not for night.
Guil: Dark for day.

Laid out on a nine screen grid, each of the warehouse's window/screens is paired with a projector, nine in all, that together compose the images of *Trust*. Eschewing the Cubist strategies of fragmentation and spatial montage *Trust*'s images are remarkably coherent. While the film opens with a silhouette standing in the middle frame

(wearing a boater!) the screens soon disclose the single image of an aquarium with Hanna Schygulla lookalike Patries Moulen peering into its watery interior. Presented with an image of our own looking shot through the metaphor of public life as fishbowl, the scene dissolves to an Amsterdam street where an accordionist accompanies the traffic of merchants and their charges. While there is no boat in *Trust*, when the sidewalk floats from beneath the feet of the accordionist he tests the emptied space with his boot ('boat' derives from the Dutch 'boot'). In a startling moment of composure Barker applies the camera directly to the accordion's splintered surface, forgoing its surround and filling the nine screen grid with an image whose undulating rhythms of expansion and contraction seem to birth the face of Patries Moulen, set this time in a slowly turning revolution that gives way in turn to an incoming sea (from the outlooking see of Moulen to the answering sea of waves). A brief section of pure color passages follow, the windows winking in their chromatic turn before a host of silhouettes take shape before the rear screens. Reminiscent of Robert Wilson's *Einstein on The Beach*, nine performers enact the daily rituals of house keeping and employment: cleaning, sleeping, cooking and drawing out papers. This series of gestures become, through their simultaneous presentation, a meditation on the way disjunctive and

fragmentary moments in our lives are felt to exhibit coherence through the application of a narrative that will sum up or account for the past. As the lights slowly fade a single performer handstands his way toward the window before executing a clown like fall and the show is over.

Guil: Yes, I'm very fond of boats myself. I like the way they're contained. You don't have to worry about which way to go, or whether to go at all - the question doesn't arise, because you're on a boat, aren't you?

Trust seems remarkably free of the image/text connotations that have become a dominant theme of so much post-structural work in video, film and photography. Saussure's *Theory of General Linguistics* which revealed language as a series of differences whose meaning is dependent entirely on its relative position within a system, alongside the Lacanian insistence that the unconscious is structured like a language, entered film criticism through the writings of the Screen magazine group in the seventies. A global copulation of image and text ensued, as if the bond between an image and its referent or an image and its viewer was impossible without the mediation of the word. If all art once aspired to the condition of photography (Walter Pater) then we might rewrite Pater's dictum to suggest that today all art aspires to the condition of criticism.

But Barker's allusive montage does not entirely displace the hegemony of the word. His *Trust* after all grew from a commision (synonym of trust) housed in a property committed in trust for the benefit of another and presented free of charge to its audience (trust: to see goods on credit). But the largest trust is inevitably brought by an audience to film's draconian methods of presentation. In no other medium is one so apt to find the gestures of recrimination and outrage that has so often accompanied the screenings of film art. While modernist exhibitions of the past have provided traditional sites of transgression, the ideologies of progression and rupture have largely given way to postmodernist "levelling" of history. In spite of all this Toronto's grandly named film bout "The Festival of Festivals" provides an annual forum for outrage as an unsuspecting public castigates one more film that is understood in terms of its deficiencies. It doesn't have a plot. It doesn't have characters. It doesn't progress in a linear fashion. Because the establishing shot of public cinema is often the same as the avant garde: darkened theatre, film screen, projector in back; the expectations that devolve around film's infinite rectangle assume a continuity of expression. "I have sat in this seat before, or another like it, in a theatre quite like this one, and when the film starts I'll know what it is, because it should appear to me as familiar as my surroundings."

In the collective anonymity of the theatre there is a kind of trust passed between spectator and image, a trust in the theology of form, that there is only one way to put one image next to another, all points moving like the perspectives lines of vision to a final point in the rear, to the end of the story. We might say about the conditions of film's presentation: that cinema is a victim of appearances or that loosed from the moorings of traditional signification a new kind of trust suggests itself.

Guil: (Leaping up) What a Shambles! We're just not getting anywhere.
Ros: (Mournfully) Not even England. I don't believe in it anyway.
Guil: What?
Ros: England
Guil: Just a conspiracy of cartographers, you mean?
Ros: I mean I don't believe it! (calmer) I have no image. I try to picture us arriving, a little harbor perhaps... roads... inhabitants to point the way... horses on the road... riding for a day or a fortnight and then a palace and the English king... That would be the logical kind of thing... But my mind remains a blank. No. We're slipping of the map.

Barker's sure handed use of the film medium is married to a radical incompleteness that every where suggests connections without making them explicit, without terminating its diffusion of possibilities. Just as he has 'gone halfway' to his public by bringing his film/performance work out into the street *Trust* breaks with the monologue usually associated with the proscenium and extends its narrative powers to an audience that will learn to trust themselves or forever give themselves over to the master/slave relations new "Canadian" cinema hopes to borrow from its American cousin.

Ros: We drift, downtime, clutching at straws. But what good's a brick to a drowning man?
Guil: Don't give up, we can't be long now.
Ros: We might as well be dead. Do you think death could possibly be a boat?
Guil: No, no, no... Death is... not. Death isn't. You take my meaning. Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being. You can't not-be on boats.
Ros: I've frequently not been on boats.

(All quotations are taken from "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" by Tom Stoppard. London, Faber and Faber, 1967)