

SEVERED INTENSITIES

Conjuring John Hughes' *What I Have Written*

by Lesley Stern

Colour comes and goes. One moment it's there - in the background, on edge, momentarily emblazoned on a fragment of the image, fluttering across the screen - and then it's gone. So you wonder, as when you catch an unexpected glance thrown across a crowded room: Was it there at all? Or has desire conjured into being a sensation, a memory, a texture? Perhaps a person.

PERHAPS A PERSON. It's not merely sensations, ephemeral gratifications, that are produced by fantasy; in the realm of the fantastic, intensities are severed from the real, people and relationships are realigned, conceived out of thin air. And out of the thin air of cinema *What I Have Written* conjures, marvellously, but with a lethal undertone, a story about storytelling. Yet this is what the film prompts me to ask: Is the cinema, for all the flickering ephemerality of its images, itself thin air? And is there some "real" that exists before, and outside of, the cinematic experience?

A man's voice narrates, in the first person, a story of a marriage gone stale, a Melbourne estrangement played out in Châtel-Guyon and Paris, his own seduction by an older woman, the beginning of an affaire. Châtel-Guyon is given as a series of stills in black and white, or perhaps sepia. I can't quite describe it chromatically, but there is lustrous emanation from these images. The light spills out - out of the screen, out of the past. Two people are caught again and again in cool, antagonistic poses; strangers are stilled in motion, scrutinized; the spectre of old age, the aloof allure of youth, the spectacle of poverty - these images rise to the surface and then disappear. Like the colour which comes and goes in a most extraordinary manner, not between but across and within images - touches of colour, flashes, severed intensities. Colour *moves*. And so it is incorrect to speak of still images as though there were no movement. The images are moved by colour, but movement is also introduced in other ways. Sometimes the image seems to vibrate or disintegrate; figures are on occasion mobilized; images move into each other and out again in weird and tantalizing ways.

Then, suddenly, there is a transition: in a brash and shocking move we are back in Melbourne. The man (Martin Jacobs) and woman (Angie Milliken) are arriving home, being greeted at Tullamarine airport. In the Châtel-Guyon story, they were called Avery and

Gillian, now they are Christopher Houghton and Sorel Atherton. After the stylized "foreign" sequence - echoing *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*, Alain Resnais, 1961) - Melbourne declares itself as the "real", but the colours of the real are abrasive, synthetic. The saturation here is as curious as the black and white.

What is going on in this transition, in the imagistic difference between the sequences? Is it the case that Châtel-Guyon represents the past, or memory, or fantasy? Is Melbourne securely situated in the present, in the real?

The questions persist and, indeed, become more convoluted as the film progresses. On one level, it seems relatively straightforward. Christopher, the writer, returns home with his wife, Sorel, but continues an epistolary liaison with Frances Bourin (Gillian Jones) in Paris, whom he calls Catherine in the novel he is writing. In the novel, fact and fiction blur. But this in itself is not remarkable; what is remarkable is the *cinematic rendering* in *What I Have Written* of a story that enmeshes the imaginary and the real, the cinematic interpellation of the questions, "Who is speaking?" and "To whom?"

Paris and Melbourne are not as distinct as it might at first seem. Before long, Melbourne, too, is drained of colour, and some of the cinematic tropes identified with the past, that other country, the phantasmatic, recur. In particular, there are certain attributes of what I'll call the Paris footage that become disconcertingly present - in their very presence, however, paradoxically making the distant what we have taken to be the temporal present. Throughout the film, there are

occasional disturbances of the image, a fluttering, a realignment of the figuration which suggests the swooping of a bird, and on the soundtrack some sound that resonates like a vulturous flapping of wings.

Let me backtrack a moment: this sign of the vulture, of sexual predation, is intimated in the opening of the film, in the credit sequence which precedes the Châtel-Guyon episode. It begins with a blur, with the abstraction of colour - a luscious blue-green which sharpens and comes into focus as an image-fragment. We see details of a painting, upside-down and from various angles, and then the painting takes flight, whooshes through the air, and lands in a slide carousel. It is a classic painting, we've seen it before: Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin, Child and Saint Anne*. A man's voice-over whispers:

"It seemed to me that, as I lay in my cradle, a vulture came to me, opening my mouth, and striking me several times between my lips, with its tail", so Freud quoted from one of Leonardo's earliest childhood recollections.

From voice-over to enactment to a close-up on his lips as he says, "It is a startling fantasy." The camera tracks this man, Jeremy Fliszar (Jacek Koman), as he walks with his carousel through university corridors and his voice, now much louder, resonates in voice-over as though in the auditorium: "Why has the suckling mother been replaced by a vulture?" Then he is in the men's room, mouthing the words to himself, perhaps rehearsing a speech, a mode that continues in a crowded lift. The sequence culminates in a lecture theatre where he is delivering a lecture to a small class, where he explains

how Freud argues the case for the artist's passive homosexuality. Again he declares, "It is a startling fantasy."

Much is set in place in this opening, but in a rather subterranean way, less emphatically than in my pedestrian account. What begins is actually an unsettling of place and time and origin (who speaks, who sees, from whence) rather than a setting in place. But there are a number of concerns that declare the disposition of the film. There will be a swooping and circling around questions of originality and copy, real and fiction, and a preoccupation with the nature of masculine fantasy. There will be strongly hermeneutic impulse, a detective element, if you like, replete with a death to be deciphered. But most strikingly there will be a compelling exploration of what Deleuze has called the "thought of cinema".

Let me sidetrack for a moment, and make a confession. I loathed John A. Scott's book (of the same name) on which the film is based, and so approached the film with great trepidation. I found the language of the book overly precious and became quickly impatient with the thematic about authorship. The self-conscious reflexivity seemed to me to amount to little more than an endless rehearsal and routine exposure of predictable male fantasies - all dressed up in aspirations to the refined art of erotica. There are times when I feel a trace of this persists in the film, particularly in an occasional sense of portentousness in the language. But mostly I think that John A. Scott and John Hughes (and Annette Blonski as script editor, I imagine) have done a superb job of transformation. The film disturbs categories - like erotica and pornog-

raphy, still and moving, detection and painting, acting and being, drama and documentation - but it also invests the material with a sense of drama and intrigue (the performances are focused and slightly mysterious even when evoking the utterly quotidian) that keeps at bay the precious ennui of arthouse erotica. And it kept me there, utterly engrossed.

I was absorbed - in a way I find very rare in Australian cinema - by the thought of cinema, by being caught up in the act of cinema thinking. When Deleuze uses this phrase, he is indicating not a particular kind of cerebral cinema, but a propensity for the cinema to enact, in the way that no other medium can, certain ways of conceptualizing and apprehending the world. It is not that philosophy illuminates the cinema, but that the cinema philosophizes. At its most exciting, the cinema can generate new relationships that turn upside down all our predictable ways of conceiving time and presence. It does this not through representing ideas, but through an enactment, through apprehending the senses, through the *matter* of cinema. *What I Have Written* does this sensationally through conjuring, out of thin air, something that matters. ☺

