asked to interview John Hughes, my brief was to focus on the personal aspects of his filmmaking, a sort of ‘man behind the film’ scenario: how he got into film; what motivates him; and how he has coped with the tough life of being a filmmaker — the endless struggles for adequate production funding; and the right to an income beyond mere subsistence level. Important issues, to be sure. But following my viewing of four of Hughes’s films, at a sort of John Hughes retrospective at the FTI in April, I am inclined not to attempt to answer these questions but rather to interrogate the questions themselves: what might be the assumptions behind, and what might be effects of, the ‘man behind the film’ scenario?

This scenario rests upon the ‘author function’, or more precisely the ‘filmmaker function’; in reading film texts, the signature of the author is regarded as the key to a ‘proper’ and authorized reading of the ‘treasure chest’ that is John Hughes’s films. This scenario also participates in the construction of the filmmaker as hero, relegating those of us who are not larger-than-life to silence. One of the dilemmas here is that this can involve seeing film as a merely transparent medium for the expression of the filmmaker’s individual sensibility or political concerns. A view quite at odds, I suggest, with the work of the four films screened, and with Hughes’s other involvements.

Some background. Hughes’ film practice began with a cinematographer’s apprenticeship with the ABC, working largely with news journalists. He then took on work as a freelance camera operator. During this time he was involved with a lobby group whose project was to democratise educational practices, by critiquing traditional modes of pedagogic authority and their associated, and largely limited forms of literacy. Hughes suggested a crucial text here, one which it is fascinating to read as an intertext with his films. Paulo Freire’s The Pedagogy of the Oppressed outlines his program for a critical-dialogic pedagogy, promoting a critical literacy and conscientization (learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality). In this context, a critical film literacy promotes reading practices which interrogate the process of representation in film, foregrounding ‘reality as process, as transformation, rather than as static entity.’ (Freire) Hence, it is not so much a question of the ‘proper’ reading as of a critical interrogation of the construction of the ‘real’, and the ‘true’ in film and the media in general.

In the 1970s in Melbourne, Hughes’ involvement in this critical-pedagogical work had its parallel in a push to democratise the media and promote a critical film/media literacy through the establishment of ‘access video’ centres. Such projects, he says, were later ‘appropriated’ by the state (the Film Board set up its own centres). However, they now have a new lease of life through such organizations as Open Channel in Melbourne, in which Hughes is active and which functions similarly to FTI, acting as a focus for independent filmmakers and those concerned with film as a critical medium.

Each of his four films screened at the FTI, (Menace, 1976, Film-Work, 1985, Traps, 1986, and All That Is Solid, 1988), deals explicitly, although differently, with this question of the politics of representation. These films critique the practices of representation which produce and authorize certain ‘truths’ and voices of authority as the expression of the truth. Pushing at the limits of the documentary form, the use of ‘faction’ (blurring fact and fiction) interrogates the documentary genre and the production of documentary ‘truths’.

This means that there is no simple revelation of a hidden treasure, a previously buried truth to be sought in Hughes’ films. In Film-Work, the productions of the Waterside Workers Federation film unit — in the 1950s are celebrated as a counterforce to the ideologically charged representations of the workers and their real conditions in the newsreels of the time. But these counter-productions themselves are revealed as no less staged and constructed.

If interrogating the question of the ‘man behind the film’ produces a certain absence in this interview (my questions and his answers) then this parallels one of the very effective strategies — employed in Menace and All That Is Solid, in particular, for interrogating the documentary form. In both films it is the work of specific absences that leads to a questioning of what is usually present in documentary, that is, orthodox forms of truth-making.

Menace, the most conventional, ‘issue-based’ documentary of the four, reconstructs the cold war period of the 1950s through the reminiscences of communists and others who struggled against Menzies’ push to introduce ‘proto-fascist’ anti-communist legislation. The most conspicuous absence here is the propaganda film, produced under the same title in 1952. As Hughes noted, if realised in Menace, this important historical document is simply not available, its copyright residing with the internationally based Twentieth Century Fox company. The underlying absence of the original Menace in this 1976 documentary, draws attention to the nature of all film work as ideological practice. Here, the means of production (including funding and copyright) are inextricably caught up in a complex question of the politics of representation in film.

A perhaps more peripheral absence noticeable for me in Menace, was the absence of documentary characters who remain unidentified.

Politically this absence functions to suggest that such proto-fascist purges (where to be named is to be singled out by the authorities) may not just be a thing of the past. Indeed a number of these characters requested, as Hughes pointed out, that he not include their names in the documentary. It seems to me, however, that this absence has a broader implication. In more orthodox documentary, the superimposition of names (and often status, eg. ‘expert’ qualifications) functions to authorize the documentary voice; the right to speak, and the truth, a different point of view, but the construction of the ‘truth’ and ‘the real’ via strategies of representation in film and in journalism.

All That Is Solid deals with the impossibility of a shared idea of the future in a ‘postmodern’ world. It plays with another significant absence and another crucial intertext. Marshall Banton’s All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, the title of which is a direct quote from a line in Marx’s The Communist Manifesto.

When Hughes was awarded an AFC/ABC National Documentary Fellowship in 1986 his brief was that, whatever the film topic, he should aim at innovation in the documentary form. Hughes described to the IDA meeting how he conceived his project, not simply as a matter of meeting this requirement, but rather of interrogating the question — in this, arguably an example of critical literacy in practice. Hughes read this call for innovation in the production of a specific sensibility — which he named as the ‘postmodern impulse’.

All That Is Solid is, in Hughes’ words, an attempt to critique post
modernism from within. The mediascape and the documenta-
tary form as one of its modes of
performance (without any
privileged access to the real), is
the subject of its pastiche
screens within screens, cutting
between the TV texture of video
8 and 16mm film, and a fragmen-
tary narrative intercutting perfor-
mances of the 'real', the 'fictive',
the 'theatrical' and the 'poetic'.
What is absent is the documen-
tary narrator/questroner.

Instead, a child, a series of toys
(commodities) and a question,
"what is this called?" The child's
question, it transpires, is not a call
for an answer but for a perfor-
mance. The child's toys link the
different textures/texts of the nar-
rative and come to symbolise, in
different ways, a projection
of the future for the various
documentary characters, includ-
ing a writer, politician, educator
and economist. There is no sam-
ple key to the future here, and
this, I think, is one of the plea-
sures of viewing/reading Hughes'
films. As John Barth says: "the
key to the treasure is the treasure itself."

At the end of All That Is Solid,
the toys are reappropriated by a
mother and child as tools for a
fishing trip — a suggestion
perhaps of how we can put our
treasure to practical use. It seems
appropriate, then, to close with
German's citation of Marx:
"All fixed, fast-frozen relations,
with their train of ancient and
venerable prejudices and
opinions, are swept away, all
new-formed ones become an-
tiquated before they can os-
size. All that is solid melts into
air. All that is holy is protaned.
All that is solid melts into
feather into a high-
magical look to the set.

Many years ago,
and men(s) at last are forced
to face ... the real conditions
of their lives and their relations
with their fellow men."

Marion Benjamin is an
Honours student in humanities at
Murdoch University and co-
directed in The Name of the Crow
for SBS Australian Mosaic series.

Sugar (or Zucker in German) is
the third in what could be termed
a "trilogy" of films made by the
Erler since they have been
based in Australia.

The first of these was The
Beautiful End Of This World
(1983), a thriller which dealt with
the dangers of pesticides. As
Rainer points out, Germany's
chemical industry is responsible
for much of his home coun-
tryp's appalling environmental
damage, and there it's a brave
person indeed who admits pub-
icly that they're a chemist! This
film was voted TV play of the
month, and was the highest rat-
ing telemovie as well.

News — A Report Of A Jour-
ney To A Glowing Future (1986),
followed. This 35mm feature,
rather less subtly titled The
Atomic Conspiracy by the US
distributors, is a genuinely engag-
thrilling. It calls attention to one
of the frightening weaknesses in
atomic energy systems: the final
storage of the radioactive "ash"
emitted from nuclear power
plants. This film is distinguished
by its seamless integration of a
phenomenal amount of true and
terrifying information into a high-
ly commercial drama.

Fifty-six year old Rainer Erler,
who was born in Munich, was de-
termined from his earliest school
days that he would make motion
pictures. He gave lectures on film
dramaturgy and the technique of
filmmaking, wrote plays, his first
screen-play, critiques for film club
magazines, and directed plays
for small theatres.

After completing his secondary
education, Erler spent the first for-
mative years in the film studios of
Munich, Berlin, Hamburg and
Vienna. He then acted as assis-
tant director to the most famous
German directors of this time and
studied film production with Eric
Pommer, the legendary producer
of Joseph von Sternberg's The
Blue Angel.

Rainer Erler's first full-length
feature, after a long series of
sordid, short subjects, the
fantasy-comedy Transmigration
Of A Soul (1962), won the Ernst
Lubitsch Prize, the Prix Italia, and
the Golden Nymph at the Monte
Carlo Television Festival. It is still
running in cinemas in East and
West Germany.

To date, Rainer has made over
forty films, the most notable in-
cluding: The Delegation (1970),
The Last Vacation (1975), Oper-
ation Ganymede (1976), Plüro-
nium (1978), Meat (1979), and
Here Comes The Guri (1980).

Most of Rainer's fiction has
been novelizations of his various
films, although with Sugar he is
filming his novel of the same title.
Once again, he is dealing with an
important environmental issue in
a very palatable and commercial
form. As this 16mm telemovie's
subtitle, The Sweet Disaster
Comedy indicates, humour is the
audience hook this time. The
issue at the film's core is bio-
engineering.

Sugar's drama concerns a
ecological engineer, Lydia
Kaminski-Smith (played by West
Australian Sally Sander) who, in
order to keep with microbiologist
husband, Sir Leo Kaminski,
(European actor, Helmuth Lohn-
er) develops a new strain of
micro-organisms designed to
recycle trash. An unintentional
blunder in the grey-haired mar-
rried rival's game liberates
microbes that turn paper into
sugar, causing an epidemic. No
paper is safe: neither the contents
of the Royal Public Library, nor
the bank notes in people's wallets.

I visited the set when the crew
was working at the Old News-
paper House in Perth. It had
been convincingly turned into a
public library, chaotic from the
destruction wreaked by organ-
isms too small to see. The small
crew, almost entirely West Aus-
trian, was working calmly and
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