



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 As Hughes indicated and as thematised in *Menace*, this important historical document is simply not available, its copyright residing with the internationally based Twentieth Century Fox company.

The unavailability and therefore 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 that the documentary characters 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 Berman'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' as implicated 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

## CRITICAL LITERACY:

# The key to the treasure

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' 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' 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 fascinat-

ing 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 *conscientizacao* (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-pedagogic 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*, 1985, and *All That Is Solid*, 1988), deals ex-

plicitly, 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

modernism from within. The mediascape and the documentary 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 fragmentary narrative intercutting performances of the 'real', the 'fictive', the 'theatrical' and the 'poetic'. What is absent is the documentary narrator/questioner.

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 performance. The child's toys link the different textures/texts of the narrative and come to symbolise, in quite different ways, a projection of the future for the various documentary characters, including a writer, politician, educator and economist. There is no simple key to the future here, and this, I think, is one of the pleasures 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 Berman'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 antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men(sic) 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.



A scene from *Sugar*, the latest film by German director, Rainer Erler and his wife, Renata, who have spent the last 30 years combining strong convictions and filmmaking with love of travel. For the last eight years they've lived in Perth while still making films primarily for the European market. Robert Bull caught up with them on the set of *Sugar*.

### Just a spoonful of Sugar

*Sugar* (or Zucker in German) is the third in what could be termed a "trilogy" of films made by the Erlers 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 country's appalling environmental damage, and there it's a brave person indeed who admits publicly that they're a chemist! This film was voted TV play of the month, and was the highest rating telemovie as well.

*News — A Report Of A Journey To A Glowing Future* (1986), followed. This 35mm feature, rather less subtly titled *The Nuclear Conspiracy* by the US distributors, is a genuinely engaging thriller. 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 highly commercial drama.

Fifty-six year old Rainer Erler, who was born in Munich, was determined 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 formative years in the film studios of Munich, Berlin, Hamburg and Vienna. He then acted as assistant 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 sardonic 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 including: *The Delegation* (1970), *The Last Vacation* (1975), *Operation Ganymede* (1976), *Pluto-*

*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 genetic engineer, Lydia Kaminski-Smith (played by West Australian Sally Sander) who, in order to keep with microbiologist husband, Sir Leo Kaminski, (European actor, Helmuth Lohner) develops a new strain of micro-organisms designed to recycle trash. An unintentional blunder in the grey-haired married 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 banknotes in people's wallets.

I visited the set when the crew was working at the Old Newspaper House in Perth. It had been convincingly turned into a public library, chaotic from the destruction wreaked by organisms too small to see. The small crew, almost entirely West Australian, was working calmly and efficiently under the assured guidance of Rainer. Cameraman, Simon Akkerman, said they were filming under the library's existing fluorescent lights only, aiming to grade and correct colour in the laboratory. This would ensure a "natural" look to the set.

Apart from Helmuth Lohner, the cast is Australian and also includes Bruce Spence, Emily Weare, Janine Jones and Colin McEwan.

Rainer would not, for contractual reasons, reveal the budget. But, it is hardly "high" as reported by some sources. Rather Rainer described it as "low to medium" (whatever that means!).

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