

"the hole in the doughnut"

Text of a review of *All That Is Solid* by John Slavin, first Published in the *The Age 'Monthly Review'* pg 12, May, 1989.

The ambience in which John Hughes's latest film was recently screened – the Melbourne Centre for Contemporary Arts – suggests an interchange of space and time. In the past few years Hughes, who is a Marxist film-maker, has made a practice of showing his work in conjunction with the paintings of his friends, Peter Kennedy. A visitor therefore who arrives at the central courtyard of the centre and turns into the main picture gallery is confronted first with Kennedy's large surrealist paintings – investigations of an identifiably Australian landscape and bleak underground scenes of devastation interrupted by arbitrarily imposed signs of stars and hearts – and only afterwards notices the television monitor occupying a corner of the vast floor space on which Hughes's film is screened.

The French film-maker Jean Luc Godard once had one of his characters contentiously comment (in *Le Petit Soldat*) that "photography is truth and therefore cinema is truth 24 times a second". The emphasis on the still, on the space of the film's fundamental building block, is emphasised by the presence of these large canvases even while Hughes's film subverts the assumption that truth can be captured by an accumulation of moving images. Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle after all argues that in attempting to specify the nature of the subatomic building blocks at the base of all matter, intelligence may designate the space such fragments occupy, or the velocity, the time path, of their trajectory, but not both at the same time. A modicum of indefinability, the Uncertainty Principle, is therefore endemic to the definition of space/time.

Hughes's film takes us on a journey through time, both in its technical ability to impose and superimpose one dazzling image after another – for this is a non-narrative documentary which successfully incorporates the swift shifts of emphasis from one apparently disconnected action to another, familiar to devotees of video clips as a stylistic device – and in its central intention to address an Australian response to the prospect of the future.

His film, and to a much lesser extent Kennedy's paintings, are a response to the felicitous invitation of the Art Museum of the University of Queensland to contribute in their various media to the Bicentenary occasion. Their work is thus the product of a specific event, a time window through which they, as artists of the Left, have passed through in an attempt to sketch our present condition in terms which refer to a dialectical method, past engaging with present, private with public, to produce the momentum contingent on futurist speculations.

The film opens with a splendid postmodernist parody. An androgynous angel stands in a wind storm of news paper scraps singing in a ridiculous cracked falsetto the repeated phrase: "A storm is blowing from Paradise/" The phrase is taken from the German critic Walter Benjamin's *Theses on a Philosophy of History*: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise...This storm irresistibly propels him into the future into which his back is turned while the pile of debris before him grows skywards. This storm is what we call progress."

The implicit optimism of the images, the Marxist comment that progress is blowing us further and further from a lost paradise is almost immediately undermined as the camera draws back to reveal the artificially imposed frame of a primitive stage overlooking the St Kilda foreshore, a wind machine, a demonically energetic director prompting the repeated line, and the paraphernalia of a camera crew. This is a film whose sudden shifts of perspective constantly undermine any secure position it may construct in relation to its subject.

That it also incorporates a wide range of media devices into its fragmentation of the linear text, home movies, theatre, current affairs interviews, photographs, to name but a few, not only serves to emphasise its "modernity" but to throw into doubt the capacity of such genres to deliver a definitive statement.

Without hesitation the film plunges us next into the middle of a David Byrne/Talking Heads song, *In The Future*, whose lyrics are an endless list of contradictory statements about forecasting ("In the future water will be expensive. In the future all items will be free.") While one of Hughes's recurring characters, Nikos, shaves himself in a hypnotically determined way as though our physical predicament is of growth, changes, decline which we are forever attempting to repress through adherence to habit.

After such a complex and energetic beginning the film sets up its rhythms through certain recurring images and its patina of techniques. There are, for example, a number of "Talking Heads" – expert witnesses from a wide political and professional perspective such as Professor Ted Wheelwright and Katherine West who are invited to comment on a series of found objects drawn by a child from a toy box. Out of this random dip the child presents a dice, an angel in a glass hemisphere, a bullet, a wedding cake decoration and a small globe of the world. These are used like Rorschach blots to provoke a response from the witnesses who speculate on certain developments in Australia's present and future – the environment, political structures, education, social relations and the arms race. The comments are in the main bleak, indicating disillusionment with the potential of social relations to transform the material world as international capital extends its reach for resources and markets.

In broken conjunction with these commentators we are offered glimpses of some personal histories. A man and a woman meet at Parliament Station in Melbourne and begin a lover's disagreement about her desire to have children. The anarchist Nikos we last saw shaving visits a little boy (his son?) with a box of dead leaves, and dreams that together they dig a human organ which he calls his heart out of pack ice. A woman whom we are told has been abandoned by her lover prepares to play the lead in Euripides's *Medea* (a classic case of rejection of the future when Medea literally prohibits regeneration by murdering her children and the wife who is to replace her). Meanwhile, an actor rehearses a speech which narcissistically numerates his many attributes as though in the state of social disfunction impotent self stroking is the only pleasure.

The implication of these scenes is to suggest a breakdown specifically in male/female relationships, divergence of attitudes and goals which appear irreconcilable. In the case of the "nuclear" family – and they become just that as we see them in a parody of disaster films camping in primitive circumstances as the father declares: "I still don't know how we lost our house" (Nor do we. Economic mismanagement? Or nuclear disaster?) – a resolution is suggested by a cloyingly idealised pastoral scene in which husband and wife make a resolution to share domestic responsibilities and consult regularly with each other on differences of attitude.

This suggested resolution however is undermined by the voice-over of witnesses expressing a wish for a nuclear free and independent Australia while the couple in more mundane circumstances take an apparently interminable journey on the Melbourne Loop while he intones, referring to the doughnuts they are eating: "People tell you to keep your eye on the future. They don't tell you the hole is the future."

It is in such a context that we begin to play out one of the link games across the complex imagery of the film. The doughnuts are in evidence during the male's evasion of fatherhood. A female sexual organ is referred to in slang terms as a doughnut. It now becomes the prime symbol of nihilistic expectations about the future. That image extends further into the environment the couple inhabit as the camera takes us into the head of the electric train in which they're travelling to see a different kind of doughnut, the metal

round of the underground tube flash by – a metaphor for the blind progress of the technological future constantly referred to. This in turn is associated with one of the found objects, a bullet which Senator Jo Valentine, the anti-nuclear campaigner, specifically links not just to the arms race but to the “now domestic technology developed from military hit-tech”. By such iconographical means the film carries its dialectical momentum through from “underground” personal relationships to the wider socio-political context.

Its central suggestion is that the persona is permeated by the all-intrusive and alienating nature of the industrial-military realm, a thesis it has drawn and modified for the late 20th –Century use from *the* classic text on the subject, the Communist Manifesto: “Constant revolutionising of production,” Marx wrote, “uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.”

The most impressive quality about *All That is Solid* for me is its refusal to occupy any final rhetorical stance towards its subject. Within the mosaic of its various abbreviated threads, its “narratives”, it suggests a pattern of rich relationships which seem even after a second or third viewing to be inexhaustible. These implications apply to a diverse range of theses including male/female relationships, the future of the family, the effect of infancy on adulthood, the nature of sexual revenge, labor relations, the artificiality of the media, and the reification of ideas – that is as embodied in and limited by received objects which become in our need to find alternatives to our material entrapment, fetishes.

But if, like the stars, we are all condemned to increase the distances between us because of the conditions of industrialisation and the fetishism of materialism, there is some comfort to be gained from the fact that the splintered nature of late 20th Century relations is the shaping force of Hughes’s fragmented discursive technique and that it is in the disjunctions of a reconsidered modernism, as Marshal Berman in his study of the modernist adventure *All That is Solid Melts into Air* has so persuasively argued and Hughes so brilliantly exemplifies, that we may be compelled to face in the not-too-distant future the “real conditions which shape our lives and our relations with our kind”.