NON-STOP CINEMA (I never did like monitors)

STEVE HAWLEY talks to Catherine Elwes

Steve Hawley is one of our most significant second-generation film and videomakers and has combined an enduring fascination with language with a powerful visual sense, both qualities being underscored by an unerring sense of the absurd.

In *We have fun drawing conclusions* (1982), Hawley revealed the learning of a mother tongue to be as much a question of ideological indoctrination as a conceptual problem of language acquisition. Appropriating text and images from the l950s Ladybird series of children's books that follow the adventures of Peter and Jane, he reorders them into a narrative of gender and class positioning with Peter helping Daddy to wash the car, while Jane bakes cakes with Mummy in the kitchen. The books had a personal resonance, says Hawley, because "the characters in the Ladybird books looked very similar to my own family. There was an autobiographical element in the work that wasn't immediately evident." The feminist reading that has often been made of this tape was not, in fact, his primary concern in the appropriation of Peter and Jane: "I was more interested in the way that the children were always having fun. Even when terrible things were happening, like a house burning down or someone was drowning, they would always be laughing merrily." Hawley was slightly surprised when people found the stiff upper lip element of the tape so funny. "I found it quite tragic although I recognise that it was also absurd."

The distortion of reality that language entails first struck Hawley when he read Lewis Carroll who was a mathematician and logician as well as an author of children's books. Here, Hawley saw the cracks in formal logic especially in Carroll's anti-Semitic examples of syllogism: "All Jews have big noses, therefore all men with big noses are Jews". Logic, it turned out was far from neutral. Hawley's fascination with language extended to invented languages. Working with Tony Steyger, he made a documentary about the numerous invented languages in existence from Esperanto to Volapuk, some of which are only spoken by a handful of people worldwide. In *Language Lessons* (1994) we meet the denizens of a cultured underworld of competing international languages all of whom believe that world peace would follow the adoption of a common language. The eccentricity of these mostly middle-aged Englishmen takes on a sharper edge when one bow-tied gentleman argues that English, the most mongrel of all invented languages has become an instrument of American cultural and political expansionism. Hawley has scrutinised linguistic structures and conventions, but has also investigated the language of the visual image. In *Trout Descending a Staircase* (1990), he

turns a sharp eye on the clichés of pictorial grammar enshrined in the traditions of painting. Using a trace and keying technique, the artist holds up a succession of classic still life objects in front of a gilded picture frame. As Hawley waves fish, flower and banana in front of the frame, he creates an instant electronic futurism within it, weaving delicate repeating patterns. The result is very funny and the 'serious nonsense' here is a parody of the ossified traditions of high art as well as the fantasy of instant mastery that digital imaging programmes were promising in the early '90s.

The structures of language, in their arbitrary coalescence of meaning, also, at times, create a kind of poetry. As Hawley explains: "When you read those Ladybird books, they are like a wonderful, odd poem. I always liked the fact that pedagogic or technical languages can become a kind of unconscious poetry." He also became fascinated by signs taking on new meaning when letters become detached or disappear, sometimes, as in *The Man from Porlock* (1995) through an electrical fault. Somewhere towards the middle of the film, a neon sign announcing the presence of a Banco Nazionale is observed from a hotel window. The sign, shot at different times of day and night loses some of its letters through some technical faults or by means of different framing. 'Nazi' becomes detached from 'Nazionale' prompting Hawley to spin a tale about a young woman forced to work for the Nazi bank under the occupation who eventually finds consolation (with the end of the word) in the arms of an Irishman called 'O Nale'. The fact that we know this fabulation to be the artist's invention combined with the almost pre-determined way in which it fits the bank's changing states of nomenclature, once again draw out the absurd in our need to name and create narratives out of the world around us. There is also a pleasure "in being led to believe one thing and knowing that it is rubbish." The spectator enjoys being taken for a conceptual ride.

Narrative is another of Hawley's enduring preoccupations. Although he was at art school when the structuralist filmmakers held sway and were arguing fiercely that all narrative pleasure should be excised from film, Hawley wanted to "do things that were much more engaging, that engaged with fictional narrative." As he says, his work hovered between the materialist positions of filmmakers like Peter Gidal and videomakers like David Hall, and mainstream film. "The Peter and Jane tape is a sort of a story, it has identification in it, it is fictional, but it exists on another level as well" – that of Brechtian distanciation crystallising language into a recognisable object of culture. Hawley is part of the generation of videomakers that reintroduced narrative, identification and the pleasurable recognition of images in reaction to the austere films of structural materialists. New Narrative told stories once again, but with a constant reference to their means of production, to the fact that they

were a construct, and constituted one reality among many rather than imposing universal truths. In *We have fun drawing Conclusions*, Peter and Jane's story is told in very stilted language, and the text is figuratively put into quotation marks by Hawley's dead pan style of delivery and gradual interferences in the text. Although we are prepared to suspend disbelief and imaginatively enter into the story, we never lose sight of its discourse as a contrivance. Like other New Narrativists, Hawley did not subscribe to the hard-line structuralist insistence that truth "is a floating thing". For Hawley, the floating that film and videomaking can induce "is more about enjoyment" and in his case about the serious fun of investigating "how narrative fiction is created". In the course of his investigation, Hawley exposes the underlying ideologies of current modes of communication – those things we say without thinking.

There is considerable pleasure in the textual play of Hawley's work, but much of the enjoyment is derived from their depiction of travel. Many of his tapes and films are structured around journeys that are part fiction, part document of his own peregrinations. For him, landscape always has "a metaphorical significance" and he attributes his predilection for images of skies to being British and therefore part of the landscape painting tradition exemplified by Turner and Constable. "Skies are always very important," he says, "in England they change dramatically from moment to moment." In terms of meaning, Hawley finds "metaphors of vast currents of thoughts and ideas and maybe even spirituality, that, close up, you get in things that can be quite banal…This can produce an ironic conjunction. The mixture of grandeur and banality can be delightfully absurd." These "violent collisions of scale" are both manifest and metaphorical in *Ghost*, a tape he made while artist in residence at the Microwave Media festival in Hong Kong in1998, just after the hand-over of the colony to China. The cultural chasm between eastern subjects and western colonials emerges when a Chinese woman tells the story of 'Gweilo', the word in Cantonese that means 'ghost' and which is reserved for the white man with pale eyes and hair. The word has a pejorative meaning not unlike 'honky' or 'wop' in the west, but the white colonials, unaware of its connotations, adopted it to describe themselves. The story is juxtaposed with shots of the city seen from above, flanked by the stranger in question, huge in scale relative to the city be is observing below. The shadow of an aeroplane passing perilously close to a football game hints at the departing colonials and the more enduring influence of the west engraved on Hong Kong culture. Unlike many post-colonial works that are made from the point of view of the refugee returning to his or her roots, *Ghost* is made from the position of the expelled outsider. As the artist said, "in the context of the hand-over, as a white man, I had a feeling of being a ghost."

Many road movies constitute a search for identity, and in *A Proposition is a Picture* (1992) Hawley combines travel with a quest to find an illusive father figure who, we feel, might hold the key to his son's identity. A male voice narrates the search as the camera takes us through winter landscapes, across mountains and rivers and into the enchanted canals of Venice. The errant father is also suggested in a series of shadows that appear in the landscape principally the shadow of a chairlift sliding silently along the snow. The words of the enigmatic and absent father sound a warning note. "Catch not the shadow and lose the substance", he says, as his son looks through a series of family photographs showing generations of beaming faces that reveal, as well as conceal the stories behind the smiles.

Hawley was surprised to discover that most people assumed the work to be autobiographical. He observed that viewers need very little information to put autobiographical constructions on a work: "They seek fictional pleasure through identification with characters and they seek knowledge of the author." In fact, the photographs were of his wife's family and his father did not leave home. However, there is a certain convergence of truth and fiction as Hawley explains: " My father didn't go missing, but in a psychological sense there are parallels. He wasn't around much." Hawley's fiction envelops the truth. The artist regards his own life as a legitimate object of interest and invents characters that reflect his own interests and experience. But, ever the linguistic sleuth, he is "interested in the moments when the documentary and the fiction are blended together. The work then inhabits a strange world in which you aren't really sure of what is true, but at the same time you are still captivated by the fiction." The play between fabrication and autobiography and the teasing of the audience's credulity allow Hawley to tackle personal themes in his work, material that feminists of his generation were happy to address head on. Hawley admits that he is "too vulnerable to make work about myself" and feels happier with a "quasi-fictional shell around me". And yet in three tapes, he has addressed the subject of heterosexual relationships, albeit through the medium of a kind of allegorical historicism.

The story of Daguerre's discovery that mercury could be used to develop photographic plates is combined with the musings of two lovers fashioning emotional metaphors out of chemical compounds - the phosphorous of passion, the lead of guilt etc. Their exchanges are counterposed by stories lamenting the sad fate of the miners who extracted the mercury and the folly of Chinese Emperors who took mercury for eternal life. Together, the narratives underscore a visually rich montage of images, both natural and man-made. Stunning shots of waterfalls give way to lingering observations of a disordered laboratory and time is marked by the magical appearance of an image in a Polaroid

held up before its subject. The disappointments of love and the wonders of science turned sour come together as 'bad love and dirty science'. This poetic work circles around the moment when love turns to hate, when invention dissolves into tragedy.

In *Amen ICA Cinema* (2000), circularity refers to the cyclical nature of relationships and reflects Hawley's rather bleak view of heterosexual coupling: "There is an argument that marriage changes two perfectly normal people who are wonderful outside the core relationship, but within it are compelled to dominate and manipulate one another." Unusually in Hawley's work, we see the two protagonists before the camera, this time actors who are themselves a couple. The work follows a palindromic structure with the action rolling forwards and then backwards. The couple interact seductively in a library setting, but their gestures soon become aggressive only to become tender again when the video changes direction. For Hawley, the palindromes that he writes for the work and the palindromic effect of the reversal of footage is the main focus of the work, but he allows that "there is also the notion of relationships going wrong or going around in loops." The imposition of an ordering principle derived from language has the effect of heightening the drama of the couple's interaction and their almost balletic gestures become archetypal and so painfully recognisable. We have all played this scene, some of us many times.

In his new work *Plot*, Steve Hawley is taking what for him is a bold step: he is including his own super 8 home movie footage, ranging from his wedding day film shot by a drunken uncle to sequences of his child growing up as observed by his proud parents. The rawness of this footage has led Hawley to instigate an even stricter procedural schema derived from the new potentialities of digital technology. As he explains, "with the software to write DVDs you can have up to thirty-two different subtitles for any one image and eight different soundtracks. You can play these elements at random and make the scenes combine with different subtitles and voice-overs. You will be plunged into the heart of the film, and the film will carry on forever and there will be no beginning or end." Unlike Stan Douglas, who has used a similar technique, Hawley is not interested in the aleatory nature of the system for its own sake, instead he is fascinated by how meaning is made, "how images are mediated by a different voice or a different piece of text." To a large extent, this adoption of non-linearity has been a key part of his practice to date. His earlier works are often long and what he calls 'digressive', combining elements drawn from a number of sources and locations around an apparently loose thematic structure. This approach reflects his own, agnostic view of life: "Just like anybody's, there's no real point to my life, but there is incident." For all that, the result never appears random and he is careful to "hold the viewer" with a series of engaging stories and clever linguistic

conceits. In *Plot*, Hawley's digressive or discursive style will now form an intrinsic part of the work, part of its technological specificity but the resulting filmic experience will still maintain narrative coherence.

For Hawley, it is important that *Plot* is shown in a cinema and not in a gallery. Contrary to my preconceptions, he does not regard himself as a video artist or indeed a gallery artist. As he says, he never fetishised monitors and wasn't interested in their sculptural potential. He admits that video was a good medium for dealing with language. "It is a linguistically led medium, very good for people talking, for talking heads. It is also good for humour both on television and in art." However, he found the early video equipment cumbersome and preferred to shoot on super 8. It was the editing potential of the Sony series 5 edit suite that interested him more. Once it became accessible to artists in the early '80s, the series 5 enabled us to separate picture and sound and create new juxtapositions of elements from different sources. For Hawley it became the basis of a more musical, structured approach to editing. But he did not like to show the results on monitors. Most of his works were conceived as filmic projections, visual spectacles contained by a controlled, cinematic environment. All his works include passages in which the soundtrack or voice over diminishes and the pure visuality of the projected image comes to the fore. "There are periods of stillness in which you contemplate the image which now takes on primary significance." This relates to the traditional enchantments of cinema, to the power of the image to transport the imagination and give access to a greater range of meaning through suggestion, through colour, movement and the emotional charge of beauty, horror or emptiness. For Hawley, the spectacle of the moving image was always difficult to explore when confined to a monitor. He needed the scale and the immersive effect of the projected image to weave his own brand of movie magic.

In Hawley's plans for *Plot*, there are clear references to the early days of cinema when it was possible to come in half way through a film and wait for the bit you missed to come round again on the next showing. In the '60s, it was possible to spend a whole day in the cinema watching the main and supporting programme loop through until the national anthem signalled that it was time to go home. Hawley reminded me that there used to be a cartoon cinema near Victoria Station: "You could walk into the film at any time and while you were waiting for your train, see some cartoons. That form of non-stop cinema appeals to me." Hawley agrees with John Smith that cinema is a site of pleasure, not only in the enchantment of losing yourself in a dream world, but it also has other pleasurable associations as Hawley explains: "It used to be a place I would go to smoke, I had sexual experiences in the cinema. I could eat, drink and fantasise." Hawley has always maintained a fascination for the flickering image of cinematic projection. He relates its mesmeric power to

primitive origins: “There is the cliché that you are in this womb-like space, gazing at flickering lights. Someone said that it harks back to primitive man seeing the light of dawn flickering on a wall, or firelight after dark, a sort of Plato’s cave without the philosophical pretensions. Lights and shadows are proto-cinematic experiences. We are conditioned to respond to that movement of light. I love projected light, even with no film. I like Peter Gidal’s films, not as philosophical texts, I just like seeing them there in their stripped down cinematic form.” Hawley embraces television as enthusiastically as cinema. When others saw broadcasting as the enemy and forged counter-cultural works, Hawley quietly harboured an admiration for the box: “I loved TV right from when we got the first set in l958. So, I couldn’t see myself as being anti-TV.” Unlike film, Hawley does not regard TV as a site of pleasure and blames television for the low status of monitor-based video art. “Television is something domestic, prosaic. In the early days, many of us were marginalized because we were dealing principally with television. When people saw those screens in the gallery, they just thought about the domestic, they thought about having their tea.” This is where Hawley diverges from many of his contemporaries for whom the domestic and sculptural properties of the monitor were a central concern. Although, some of his tapes were broadcast in the golden era of Channel 4, Hawley says it is unlikely that his films and videos will now be shown on TV. Once again, he emphasises that they are cinematic works.

Many filmmakers have entered the gallery convinced that cinema is dead and that the spectator, newly liberated from her cinema seat will become the proverbial interactive participant in moving image art. Others provide computer-aided participation, buttons to press. Hawley is not overly impressed: “I never thought much of interactive art, because all art is interactive. If you look at a painting, you are interacting with it. You walk around it, go away, come back and speculate as to its meaning. It’s not a passive activity.” Contrary to structuralist doctrine, Hawley does not consider watching a film to be passive either. He concedes that “maybe it’s voyeuristic,” but ever the pragmatist, he asserts that doing away with the pleasures of voyeurism would be “like chucking away the best bit of cinema, and you can’t do that.”

In spite of a potentially cavalier attitude to voyeuristic practices, Hawley is sensitive to the possibility of exploiting the subjects in his work, particularly the exponents of invented languages in *Language Lessons*. “When we shot them on the beach, with the wind blowing off Ralph’s hat, they really did look eccentric. All documentary is exploitative, that one less so than most.... The last thing the Volapuk guys did was for Eurotrash where they came across as completely mad. We used the trajectory of their arguments about the cultural imperialism of English, so we do come out vaguely in favour of them.” Hawley underestimates

both his own sensitivity and the strength of his subjects' individualism in a world where television has homogenised experience and reduced all human existence to spectacle. The portrait he paints returns to these linguistic guerrillas much of the dignity that Eurotrash undermined. However, this delicacy of touch does not mean that Hawley subscribes to the position that "all forms of depiction of human beings in film are an abuse of power" and for him, Peter Gidal's solution to avoid all representations of individuals is "too limiting and extreme". Hawley finds the solution in his own brand of poetic deconstruction in which individuals, including himself, inhabit a fluid field of signification with what he calls 'floating parameters'. Here, the subject is partly reflective of existing representational structures, but also precipitates moments of syntactical resistance. These 'puncti' or charged moments of meaning occur in the absurd, in the poetic and what he calls 'surreal mismatches' of picture and sound. They also occur in the aesthetic balance of an image, in moments of pure visual pleasure, and they arise in the flashes of recognition as a story hits home.

Steve Hawley's formal skills, sharp eye and wit are there to enjoy for anyone who chooses to enter his world of conceptual conceits and syntactical play. By exploiting his inclination to fragment, digress and reiterate, he offers a solution to the current problem of 'holding the viewer' now that s/he is liberated from her cinema seat and with an attention span determined by the quick fix of advertising, finds herself drifting, undirected through a gallery space. In his notion of 'non-stop cinema', Hawley leads us back to the multiple pleasures of a secure seat in the enveloping darkness of the picture-house. With our habitual pleasures of eating, caressing and fantasising endorsed once more, we are more likely to stay the course rather than wander off to the next exhibit. However, Hawley does not reinstate linear narrative with its connotations of passive consumption and normalising worldview. Instead, he offers a maze-like, rambling narrative that in its infinite permutations of image, sound and text recreates the way that some of us think and most of us dream.

Catherine Elwes September 2003

With thanks to Steve for the edifying conversation.