Oliver Hockenhull's Determinations

Olivier Hockenhull is a young filmmaker connected with Cineworks (British Columbia's independent film co-op). He has just finished his first feature-length film, in which he deals with the problem of conveying a somewhat apocalyptic political message.

Determination is described in its publicity material as a "radical film on the Vancouver Direct-Action anarchist group and on the question of justice in Canada." While it's not necessary to know this to get the film's message, it probably helps organize the almost 80 minutes of image, statement and nihilistic sentiment that comes at the viewer as rapid-fire as promised.

Hockenhull proposes his film is an essay, but as such it is deficient. Rather than developing an argument, the emphasis is on suggestion and a litany of statistics; Determination is perhaps more of a rant than an essay. The film centres on the concerns, actions, arrests and sentencing of the "Squatters 5" in 1982-83, and on the resulting coverage of these events in the popular media. But it also condemns the world-wide build-up of, and massive expenditure on, military armaments (particularly in the U.S. and the Soviet Union).

Hockenhull produces a sense of uneasiness and bleakness by the use of assorted visual, textual and textual strategies. He often uses traditional methods of documentary presentation (for example, voice-over and overlaying film) but seems conscious of this, and resists fulfilling expectations created by the standard notion of the documentary film. He also employs animation, shadow dance performance, broadcast news footage and other television imagery, along with dramatic sequences, to establish an impression of the human condition in crisis.

Although the film repeatedly insists its essential doctrine: "all violence is abhorrent," the message is actually undercut at times by several presumably ironic anecdotes in which the solution to various problems always comes down to more violence. An insomniac kills himself, a young prostitute, sexually molested as a child, avenges herself by stabbing her abuser "in his private," if an armoured-car guard causes trouble, kick him in the head or shoot him. Irony is a fine device, so long as it is apparent or has an obvious intentionality.

One of the film's strongest moments is a television rap poem, read by Vancouver performance poet Judy Radul, over a series of quick-cut, accelerated TV images. This is one of a few instances in which the visual, verbal and contextual elements mesh remarkably well (which brings to mind the poet Louis Zukofsky's "test or poetry" - "the range of pleasure it affords as sight, sound and reflection.

In another memorable scene, a young man delivers an anti-military monologue while a car drives wildly and pointlessly around him. This sequence is the pinnacle of humour in the film, and a rare moment.

Overall, Determination would benefit from a more developed sense of humour. The tone seldom strays from its single-minded bleakness. Possibly, the filmmaker feels his aim is too serious (or takes himself too seriously), but the balance is off.

The gloomy emotional atmosphere is further compounded by what Hockenhull calls

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“Brechtian dramatic sequences.” In these, actors perform highly-stylized scenes in which the dialogue – discussions of morality, possible actions and their consequences – provides most of the drama. The film is certainly not about production values (as Hockenhull admits), although it is not completely devoid of effective film technique. Unfortunately, there is too much of the raw, hand-held camera approach, and the sound is often poor – hard to hear (or hear clearly) what’s being said.

But many of the production problems can be forgiven as this is a very low-budget film (made for less than $25,000, Hockenhull says). He also says the film is aimed more toward an intellectual audience than to those just interested in entertainment. “I’m not glorifying the actions of these individuals (the Squamish 5) so much as trying to point out some basic blind spots in the Canadian psyche; for example, about arms manufacture,” he says. “I tend to believe there is no real political movement since the death of history on August 9, 1945.”

Determination strives for an articulate confusion in its effect. Hockenhull achieves this state at times throughout the film, but can’t sustain it. Perhaps his mere presentation of images and ideas is not enough; he never really connects all of the film’s various constituents. Still, I admire his boldness and his concerns.

Calvin Wharton

DETERMINATIONS d. Oliver Hockenhull ex. d. Doug Chomyn m. Dennis Burke of r. D.O.A. The Subhumans musical perf. Carmen Reith, Scott McLenn, Pat Chard, Guy Hannah with the cast of Al Kozuch, Hadwin, Erik Sven-Erikson, Rin Wilson, Patricia Greben, c. juegen Berwald, Jeff Carter, Scott Hannah, Bill Evans, Craig Conrally, Cynthia Wong, Glenn Anderson, Mary Daniels, Brenda Petr Bruns, Keith Gray, c.p. Louise Ross, Doug Chomyn, Judy radial, Fumiko Kiyooka, Karen Zaworny, Derek Ieen, Jackie Donner, Zilfr Lipot, Andrew McLarty. Assisted by The Canada Council, The National Film Board of Canada (Pacific Region), and Cineworks.

Two animated films from the National Film Board, which are nominated in the Best Short Film category of the Academy of the Academy of Canadian Film and Television (Genie) Awards. In addition, George and Rosemary gives the NFB its 53rd Academy Award (Oscar) nomination.

GEORGE AND ROSEMARY

Yellow birds twitter on the clothesline, and it is slowly pulled across the screen to announce the film’s title inscribed on the pegged-out laundry. The soft-voiced narrator tells us that George plays checkers with his cat, puts ships into jars, and, when the weather is nice, sits on his front porch. The last mentioned hobby allows him to watch the house opposite – “He had a passion for the lady across the street…”

As the widow Rosemary comes out, puts her goldfish in their bowl on the porch, and waves to George, he indulges in a little bit of fantasy… a fast passionate tango, followed by sips of champagne. That night, gazing from his bedroom window, in his mind’s eye, George is in the operatic mode, singing his heart out and climbing up to the widow’s window for a stolen embrace.

Finally one morning, the would-be suitor decides that this is the day. Glad in his best suit and bow tie, with garden flowers in hand, George reaches the widow’s window; he panics; everything tend to collapse; he never really connects all of the film’s various constituents. Still, I admire his boldness and his concerns.

T. Wharton

FUTURE BLOCK

Nelson is an ordinary sort of a guy, nothing special. He keeps a modest account at the Harmony Bank, and looks forward to joshing his favourite teller, Edna Beasley. He suspects all is not well when the bank entrance is blocked by a huge video arcade-game-type money machine. Nelson negotiates several electronic hazards before reaching the counter and, horrrors – no Edna! A video screen confronts him with impossible requests for his card number and his code word (he enters “hunk”, as that’s what Edna teasingly calls him). He thinks Miss Beasley comes to explain the new system to him; he panics; everything mechanical contrives to trip him up; it is all too much. Staggering into a bar for a Harvey Wallbanger, Nelson confesses in the barman, and Edna is also there dowering her frustrations with the “new” system – but the nightmare is not finished and technology has even invaded their leisure moments…

An amusing idea, well-conveyed by combining cel animation with computer-animated images. According to the NFB, “The computer images were animated separately on the screen of a standard office computer and were integrated using an animation camera equipped with a aerial image projector.” But, however interesting the technique may be, it cannot overcome a dull and overloaded cascade of words, which should have been heavily edited. The bright, very jazzy images, combined with the flow of language, which includes a lot of boring, one-note “robot” voices, becomes soporific in a very short space of time. If a 10-minute film can sag in the middle, this one does, but perks up to a good ending with a twist in its tail. But definitely full marks for technique.

T. Wharton