The visual poetry of Rick Hancox

BY BOB WILKIE

Considered one of Canada’s leading film artists, Rick Hancox has had numerous one-man and group shows and has won awards both here and internationally. Born in Toronto, he began filmmaking while studying English at the University of Prince Edward Island and quickly won recognition, earning top awards in the Canadian Student Film Festival for three consecutive years. He was awarded a Canada Council Arts Bursary for graduate study at New York University’s Institute for Film and Television and later studied at Ohio University on a Graduate Fellowship where he earned the degree of Master of Fine Arts in 1973. Since returning to Canada, Hancox has been teaching and making experimental films. Between 1973 and 1985 he taught at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario and currently teaches in the Communications Studies Department at Concordia University in Montreal.

Last spring (April, 1987), in the bar car of an overnight train en route from Montreal to Toronto, I completed the third part of a four-and-a-half-hour interview with the experimental filmmaker, Rick Hancox. The train seemed a fitting place to begin discussing his 1977 autobiographical film, Home For Christmas. A major portion of this ‘experimental-documentary’ takes place on a train as well, only this time heading in the other direction from Toronto to Montreal and beyond to the Maritimes. It takes place in December 1975 when Hancox and two other family members travelling with him returned to celebrate Christmas at his parents’ home in Landfall, Prince Edward Island.

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I was just overjoyed to discover that there was such an art form around... and it seemed that the underground film was so much more colourful and interesting.

I began to realize that I was never going to be a particularly good poet... or a musician. I thought that this might be a way in which I could put together everything that I knew...
Landfall itself was destined to become the subject and title of a later work, LANDFALL (1983) which, along with Waterloo (1982) and Breck Events (1984), belongs to a category referred to by Hancox as his "poetry films".

In these poetry films, as well as in Home for Christmas and several other earlier films, there is a strong evidence of place but not, as one might expect, a sense of belonging or of being connected to that place. What seems to displace this liaison in these films is a lament for something lost or forgotten — something that has to do with place, connection, belonging and personal identity. The loss is the result of a historical amnesia which is, according to Hancox, the product of "a society that emphasizes the present and devalues the past." This privilieging of present over past is tied up with a technologial imperative and with the "assumption...that we are progressing towards something better."

Frame enlargement from Beach Events (1984)

Historically, in Canada, technology has been used as a binding force in order to achieve "national unity." One of the most obvious examples of this is the railway. Besides linking the country physically and providing cheap, convenient transportation for generations of unemployed workers, from economically depressed regions (especially the Maritimes), the railway has itself employed hundreds of thousands of Canadians. The railway was central to the growth of entire communities and their economies. One of these communities was the Saskatchewan city of Moose Jaw.

Rick Hancox spent much of his childhood in Moose Jaw during the last years of its boom economy. His departure in the late '50s as a young adolescent was coincident with the winding down and eventual stagnation of this economy. More than 20 years later he returned to Moose Jaw only to discover an empty and decaying railway station, abandoned industries, and a compelement downtown core where the spirit of "freethinking" once reigned. The motif now, in a town where, according to Hancox, nobody ever thought of the past, is "Moose Jaw: there's a future in our past." The discarded technologies of the past have been restored only to fill the museums that have become the hope of a future economy centred on tourism. It should come as no surprise then, that the title of the film that Rick Hancox is currently working on is, of course, Moose Jaw.

As Rick and I were finishing up our interview in that smoky-filled bar car, with several other red-eyed, late-night travellers present, we reflected on much of what was said and the enormous editing job that lay ahead. We were somewhat surprised, perhaps even pleased, with the fact that much of our conversation, as we clacked along on that deliberately slow overnight train toward T.O., focused on the railway and the past it played in Rick's life, particularly in his films. We were both very tired and had all but exhausted our desire to speak the words that had become so familiar to us in the course of our conversations — experimental, autobiographical, personal, lament, loss, redemption, absence, Elder, presence, snow, landscape, Wieland, nationalism, Kroeker, postmodernism, Grant, technology — to repeat but a few. Several of the words would disappear, along with the passages they were embedded in, after the editing job was completed. One of the exchanges that was cut because it seemed trivial and irrelevant, occurred around the same time as our train rolled to a stop in the "middle of nowhere." It was made less out of curiosity than it was out of a sort of forced indifference that one experiences at the end of a project no matter how interesting it had otherwise. It is worth repeating here only because it is less than trivial, and in fact it seems to embody much of what Rick Hancox concerns himself with in his filmmaking today.

Rick: Where are we... near Cornwall... or is it Iroquois?
Bob: Who knows...?
Rick: Iroquois... Iroquois... washed over by the St. Lawrence Seaway... Iroquois... do you remember Iroquois?
Bob: No... what about it?
Rick: There were three Canadian towns... wiped out by the Seaway... that's another Canadian technology, the St. Lawrence Seaway.
Bob: Really eh... Wiped out...
Rick: Yep... Iroquois... gone for good!

Frame enlargement from Cinema Canada (1984) - Interview

Cinema Canada: Was there anyone particular artist who was close to you at the time you began to use film... perhaps another filmmaker or a photographer?
Rick Hancox: No. But my poetry and creative writing at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) were particularly good. John Smith, Frank Ledwell, Adrian Arsenault. I will keep in touch with these people almost 20 years later. It was they who introduced me to poets like William Carlos Williams and of course Wallace Stevens. There wasn't any particular film or filmmaker who influenced me. I came to Montreal in the mid-'60s, railway through one of my less successful university years, and wound up driving a cab, during which I had plenty of time to read and think about myself. It was a real transitional time. Anyway, I picked up a copy of Sheldon Vanauken's book Introduction to the American Underground Film. That was the first film book I read, and I still can't believe how I hadn't heard of or seen that kind of cinema before.

Cinema Canada: What was he talking about in that book? Which filmmakers are he referring to and how are describing their work?
Rick Hancox: He was talking about the American underground of the '60s and the whole new American filmmaking scene. Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren, Marie Menken, Willard Maas. I actually spent some time with the last two in New York and showed them one of my films. That would have been a couple of years later when I was really getting into the filmmaking. I met crazy people like Jack Smith. I remember reading about him, and then actually seeing one of his performances in N.Y.C. Reneau's book doesn't get into any serious critical analysis or theory. It's really just a description of the films... which was enough for me at the time. I had never heard of these people before. To have the works so graphically described seemed to open up a whole new world of possibilities. I was just overjoyed to discover that there was such an art form around. Thought another book around the same time — a bunch of screenplays by Bergman — and it seemed that the underground film was so much more
colourful and interesting. So I just happened to take that route... and I think I was a bit of a rebel and the radical qualities of that stuff really appealed to me... and it was the '60s too and that was a big influence... I just being set up for something like the culture I was immersed in. It was ready to receive it. I should really mention the name of one person who did influence me. It just so happened that the very next year, after having developed an interest in this sort of film, a visiting professor came to teach at UPEI for one year... and he happened to be teaching the only film course that's ever been given there. He happened to be an underground filmmaker who had a lot of connections in N.Y.C. George Kuchar was his name. It was an incredible course. He taught us film history, film production, film theory and he showed us lots of underground films. You had these P.E.I. kids, some of them right off the farm. Looking at films like Kenneth Anger. It was great! Anyway, he
Rick Hancox: A filmography

Rise 3 min. (1968)
Cab 6 min. (1969)
Tall Dark Stranger 15 min. (1970) Grand Prize and Best Scenario, Canadian Student Film Festival Best Foreign Film, Filmlokhof der Jugen, Oberhausen, West Germany
Rooftops 5 min. (1970) I, A Dog 7 min. (1971) Best Documentary, Canadian Student Film Festival
Next to Me 5 min. (1971) Best Experimental Film, Canadian Student Film Festival
September 15 5 min. (1972)
House Movie 15 min. (1972) Outstanding Special Category Award, Baltimore Film Festival 1973
Wild Sync 11 min. (1973) Ann Arbor Festival Award and Tour

Home for Christmas 50 min. (1977) Invited to Grierson Documentary Film Seminar, 1978
Zum Ditter 11 min. (1979)
Reunion in Dunville 15 min. (1981) Golden Sheaf Nomination, Yorkton International Film Festival
Watermark & Clear Day (No Memories) 6 min. (1980) 1st Prize, 8th San Francisco Poetry Film Festival, 1983 Canadian Independent Short Film Showcase, Academy of Canadian Cinema
LANDFALL 11 min. (1983)
Beach Events 81/2 min. (1984) 1st Prize, 3rd Experimental Film Coalition Festival, Chicago, 1986
Miss Jowl est. length 65 min. (in progress)
Sarada est. length 10 min. (in progress)
Arend est. length 15 min. (in progress)

Cinema Canada: Did Joyce Wieland influence your work?
Rick Hancox: No, not directly. Joyce's films didn't influence me as much as her nationalism and her independence... sort of breach nationalistic independence was inspiring. But I liked some of her films. I really don't know the extent to which they might have influenced me, but I liked some of them. Solidarity is one of my favorites.

But then I started to be influenced by some of my contemporaries, like Rimmer. I was never influenced by Elder's films. He wasn't on the scene until later. I was influenced more by his writing. And then I started to become influenced by my own students — Mike Hoolboom, Holly Dale, Janis Cole, Lorne Marin, Richard Kerr, Philip Hoffman and others.

Cinema Canada: Have you ever worked with a group or collective besides your students at Sheridan?
Rick Hancox: Yeah, I did. The Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op in the early '70s. I was very much a part of it. I was on the early executive of the TFC. There were plenty of good people there and we would exchange each other's work-in-progress, and in that way we influenced each other.

Cinema Canada: So they were like collaboratives... that sort of thing...?
Rick Hancox: Oh yeah! There were people like Raphael Bendahan, who's in Montreal now. He was on the executive then, along with Michael Snow. Keith Luck and Jim Anderson were active members of the TFC and I was very influenced by their work. These were several glorious years, when the offices of the TFC, Cinema Canada, and the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre were all sharing the same building on Jarvis St. You could go from one room to the other... you know... one minute you'd be with Canada's largest distributor of independent films, screening whatever was being sent in, or over at Cinema Canada where I might write an article about the Canadian Student Film Festival or about something else I was doing at the time.

Cinema Canada: What were your first concerns as a filmmaker? What were you trying to say in the early days like Next To Me, Wild Sync and House Movie? They are three very different films of course. Are they exemplary films or do they represent the work you had done during that period? You made reference to other films, made earlier...
Rick Hancox: Well yeah... the other night Michael Dorland said that I had made seven films, but I have actually made 16 films. Around the time I made Next To Me I also made a couple of others. Rooftops, and I A Dog, which is a film about a Prince Edward Islander who's sort of just arrived in N.Y.C.... and he spends a lot of his time just dodging dog dung. Next To Me is made up of shots I took in N.Y.C. while I was going to NYU. It was actually an NYU project. It was inspired by my personal relationship to N.Y.C. After that I went to Ohio University where I finished Next To Me and then I did Radiation at the same time. And again it was about what was going on in my life at the time. The year after that, 1973, I finished Wild Sync, so they were really all autobiographical... except that I'm not in Next To Me. It actually took me a while before I really brought that, in fact, it was a personal film. I couldn't edit it properly until I realized that.

Cinema Canada: But in Wild Sync there seems to be some concern with formal issues or an attempt to address the technology... you know, the out-of-sync claeping, the discussion of the sound and synchronizing process... and that use of sound right around the time when structural filmmaking was just in its heyday.
Rick Hancox: I don't think I was aware of structuralism when I was doing that film... the film is a satire in a sense. It's a satire on those who were infatuated with the technology. I wanted to liberate myself from the technology. A lot of people were running around in graduate school thinking that the ultimate film was a lip-synch film... or using a lip-synch camera for the simplest little exercise of 100 feet. So once I finally got access to the lip-synch equipment, I rejected all that stuff and just sent the whole thing up. So I think it was more an analysis or critique of the apparatus than a structuralist or formalist film.

Cinema Canada: Did you ever consider the idea that the ultimate film was a minimalistic, to the structuralist or minimalist art project, whereby the focusing on the materials and the processes reveals functions deconstructively and thereby debunks some of the myths around representation.
Rick Hancox: It's basically Brechtian in concept. But it is one thing, while communicating your content, to also make the viewer aware of how they are being manipulated, and it is quite another to have nothing to communicate except the form itself, where the form itself replaces the content, and all that is communicated is plastic material... it's pretty empty really. Who cares about the cinematic apparatus and in itself?

Rick Hancox: Your films deal with formal issues to some extent and you point to philosophical and existential concerns, but do you feel like your political sensibilities relate to your films?
Rick Hancox: They use form. They exploit form. They don't use it as an end. I don't go around broadcasting the fact that I'm a political filmmaker and that you had better listen! I am influenced by the things that go on around me and I want to share those things and to come to terms with them. I am certainly aware that my films fit into a political fabric, and that I am a political being. I am aware of what influences me. I respond to that. I don't pretend to represent everyone else. I mean let's back to this thing about what interests people... I think about how some of my students feel that by reducing the characters to stereotypes — i.e. the average student — they will appeal to a greater audience. You can say the same thing about the scenery or the background. If they make the interiors like the inside of an office building, for example, it will be accessible to most people. You know someone comes along and says, can't we relate to this fishing village in Newfoundland, I'm not interested in the film, but if you show me an office building in St. John's, then I can relate to it. But what interests people is other people — real people! — with their particular distorted memories, their particular childhoods, the places they come from. I think we communicate on that level, as an individual to another. Other people influence me and I want to communicate with them, but I can only do it as myself — as an individual who has had these particular
experiences. I don’t pretend that it is anything else. Now I think that my work is getting more political. If you look at the Moose Jaw film for instance. I started that project quite a while ago but the political dimension wasn’t a comprehensible factor until Arthur Kroeker (author, Technology — The Canadian Mind) rode on to the scene, or rode on to his scene. In the last two years, since I moved to Montreal, I have met several other people as well who are certainly influencing me on that level… and it’s all going back into the Moose Jaw film.

Cinema Canada: How are your films autobiographical?
Rick Hancox: The early films are direct autobiography, in which I am in the films. They are diaristic. The more recent ones are much more indirectly autobiographical. What’s in them now, perhaps, is an arm or a shadow.

Cinema Canada: Except for the fact that they are about places which are very familiar to you.
LANDFALL and Beach Events being made close to your parents’ home in P.E.I. and Waterworks being made at the bottom of the street where your father grew up.
Rick Hancox: It goes back to what I was writing poetry about — things that were a part of my experience. In any case, the personal is inevitable in art.

Cinema Canada: There seems to be a pivotal film in your oeuvre that acts as a point of departure stylistically and perhaps even as a catalyst for your later autobiographical, personal or philosophical concerns. The film I am referring to is Reunion in Dunnville. The reason I bring this film up is because I was both surprised and pleased to see it within your works. It surprised me as an experimental film, because of its documentary nature and it pleased me because it relates to some of the things you deal with in your later films and to some extent even some of the things you explore in House Movie were there.

There is a sense of absence or loss or lament that we see in both the main theme of the film, which is the rekindling of old bonds by the WWII fliers, and then there is the depiction of the old buildings, decaying and empty, which also suggests a lament or a loss for that which has gone on before, the past. Do you think of it as an experimental film?
Rick Hancox: I think it’s experimental documentary. It was burning issue with me. I approached the veterans and said that I really wanted to make this film. I thought when I made it that it was a pretty straight documentary but upon screening it for the Canadian Independent Filmmakers’ Distribution Centre, which handles a lot of independent, but conventional-looking documentary films, they thought it was off the wall — that nobody would understand it. You know, the camera was jiggling around, funny shots of thousands of turkeys and strange music thrown in and there. They dismissed it. In a way I was shocked at first — a bit hurt. It was because in reality, our experience of the present is a predition of the past. This is more than just a theory with me, this is the way I live. I find it disturbing how things pass into oblivion so quickly.

Cinema Canada: Do you mean?
Rick Hancox: Relegated to the precincts of the past. If one speaks of the past at all, it must be represented as nostalgic. The past is okay as long as it is accompanied by cute silent movie music. It is rarely said that what we did in the past, may have been, on occasion better than what happens today. We have this assumption in the West that we are progressing towards something better. It overlooks the positive achievements of the past.

My parents seem to have the opposite opinion of me. We never sit around in my family and talk about the old days or anecdotes about family experiences. My parents want to be regarded as with it, contemporary people. Any mention of the past seems to imply that you are living in the past. But I think it is the opposite, of course. I think that not ignoring these vital memories, whether they are good or bad, is less pathological, more healthy, than trying to eliminate it all. The films are an attempt to revitalize the past. In fact I once looked up our family motto in the General Armoury, and discovered the Hancox motto was ‘redeem time’! I looked it up in the process of making my Moose Jaw film. Redeem time… I think that’s what I’m doing in my films. You can compare it to the film theory of Siegfried Kracauer — his notion of film as the redemption of physical reality. In our society, says Kracauer, we have become disassociated from reality. And he thought that the reason film worked so well in redeeming that reality was because it is so realistic-looking, more than any other art form. Of course he didn’t seem to grasp how much film itself is part of the simulacra. I don’t think that film redeems physical reality but I do believe it redeems time. It allows us to realize that all time does not evaporate — that it still exists at the very least on these projected images. .

Cinema Canada: Even though it isn’t real time… it’s a represented time… or if you like, a simulation of time… an appropriation of time…
Rick Hancox: Well our memory isn’t real time either and our memories become increasingly filled with edited moving images. The style and pulse of a culture is recorded in its products and the films of the ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s are a very good analog of those times. That is at least as important as the redemption of physical reality, which is in any case impossible. One can redent it through art. I think it is a manifestation of the ontological, the forming of the image in cinema, the latent image, which is so different than the instantaneous image in video for example. Film is unavoidably committed to the past because the image cannot be seen as soon as it is recorded. It is no accident that it takes the ontological form that it does. Humans invented it. It’s very similar to the way the computer functions. It is a good analog of the human memory system.

my only attempt at doing something convention­
al, something that could be sold perhaps. They were saying, basically, go away kid, this is a personal film. But soon afterwards I saw those comments as flattering and realized that it really was a personal film. And I think I would say it is my favourite of all my films. It’s the one I secretly love the most. It means an awful lot to me because of the memories around the shootings and the subsequent screenings for the veterans and the people who were involved with it. It acts as a catalyst, if you like, that triggers a lot of pleasant and significant memories for me. It means something to those people in a personal way, beyond entertainment… and that’s very gratifying for me.

Cinema Canada: Could you focus a little more on this sense of absence or loss or lament in your films? Is it evident in the poetry films but is there in House Movie and Reunion in Dunnville as well.
Rick Hancox: And in the ones I’m working on now as well. It’s such an important issue for me, I just don’t know where to begin. I think I distrust the present considerably. I feel very strongly about this because I disagree with that philosophy, especially from the ‘60s, and I’m thinking about Alan Watt’s book This Is It, that says, this is all we have, the present moment. Forget everything else that went on before! Or that’s coming up? Get rid of all the anxiety! Don’t think of the future! Live for the present! I distrust this completely. We live in a society that emphasizes the present and devalues the past.

Our vision is contrary to what life really is,
Cinema Canada: Aren't you splitting philosophical and technological hairs when you say that film is a more precise or truthful representation or redeemer of the past than video is? Even though video can be played back instantly and film must go through a developing and fixing process, don't the two redeem time, your sense of time, which in any case is just a representation of certain events?

Rick Hancox: Well that's looking at them as if the maker had no influence on the product. When one makes a video one knows one is working with an instantaneous medium, which is partly why ones uses video. I have young students who want to get into film classes as opposed to television courses because they simply feel more comfortable with the apparatus of film. And they know... they understand clearly the differences between them. I wish that writers and critics, during their training, could get their hands on the technology - even in a token way - then they would understand the differences between them. Even when films make it on to television one can easily distinguish between a film-originated and a video-originated product. I think it's more than a superficial quality. It comes through in the very content and meaning of the work because the practitioners were influenced by the medium they were working with. One is simply not a replacement for the other.

Cinema Canada: Over the past year or so you have begun to concern yourself more closely with the theoretical and philosophical implications of your work. Why now? What was the motivation?

Rick Hancox: It didn't just start in the last year or so. It really began in the late '70s. It has just intensified over the years, especially since I moved to Montreal a few years ago. It started because I felt that my films had reached a dead-end in terms of the directly autobiographical cinema. It became unsatisfactory for me. So language seemed to me a way of better engaging the left hemisphere of the brain. I went back to poetry which I had abandoned when I got into film, when I became sort of a visual purist. I began reading Wallace Stevens again and his essay "The Necessary Angel", where he discusses the balance one must strike between reason and the imagination. For him only poetry could do this, so for him poetry was the ultimate philosophy.

Cinema Canada: You mentioned Arthur Kroeker a couple of times; how has he and his reading of technology and of Canadian thinkers such as George Grant, Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis influenced you?

Rick Hancox: Kroeker made me more conscious of what I was doing... what I had already stumbled onto several years before in the Moose Jaw footage. He also could relate to it. We both come from small towns outside the dominant centres of Toronto and Montreal. As far as his discussion of Canadian writers... well... it's further with each successive discourse. This has happened so much in film theory, with theorists attempting to make films — and they are pedantic nightmares. It's as if I had tried to start writing a film. Let's work together instead of trying to stamp the other party out!

The landscape sensibility

Cinema Canada: What does the 'landscape' mean to you and what do you see it as signifying in the Canadian context?

Rick Hancox: I became interested in landscape on a conscious analytical level when, after having programmed a series of recent Canadian experimental films for the Film Studies Association Conference at Laval University in the spring of '86, Tom Waugh of Concordia University asked me to speak to his class on the subject of 'landscape' sensibility in Canadian experimental film. He pointed out that this was the theme around which I seemed to be selecting many of the films. So, given this invitation, I had several months with the idea and I realized that I couldn't really begin to deal with landscape in Canadian experimental film until I dealt with landscape in general in Canadian art and literature. And then I read a review by Michael Dorland last fall on the Festival of Festivals where he referred to Galie Macgregor's book The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape. It was incredible how well I could relate to much of what she was saying. She makes a clear distinction between the Canadian and American approaches to the land as evidenced in the art and literature of these two countries. Now I'm not going to summarize her whole thesis, but I began thinking of my work and the work of some of my colleagues and contemporaries in these terms. I also took a look at Bruce Elder's thesis of the photographic image in Canadian Experimental cinema again. It struck me that this (landscape) was a very dominant theme in our national experimental film.

Cinema Canada: What about this connection between the landscape and the photographic image?

Rick Hancox: When I first read Elder's thesis I thought, superficially, that he meant that we simply use the photograph in Canadian films. The typical example is City of Gold by Colin Low. In fact, I believe what Elder meant was that we make reference to the nature of the photographic image in the way we deal with landscape. Now he doesn't deal directly with the landscape so much in his own thesis, but he does mention it as a kind of threatening force. He also notes two ways of perceiving. The first being the perception of nature being out there... the external or everything external to us. The second, of course, is the internal perception, the mental perception. There is such a division between those two when faced, let's say, with the northern frontier, with its harsh and forbidding climate, that any vehicle that could draw those two together would be a very important medium. And that's exactly what the photograph does, because it is at once both a product of the mind and a product of reality. It's where the mental and the physical coincide, where you have something that's physically present in the photographic print and yet it's also absent in that it is just a representation. So this absence must be compensated for in the mind... in the imagination. And the photograph, for Elder, becomes a way of mediating Canadian nature. And he believes that our experimental films make the most profound use of the ontological nature of the photograph.

Cinema Canada: Do you mean this coincidence of presence and absence...?

Rick Hancox: Yes, you see, it's not so much that I was influenced directly by this stuff in the making of films lime Watersword and Landfall, which were already good examples of this presence and absence, it's just that it was encouraging to read writers like Elder and MacGregor referring to others who were doing...
the same thing. It gave me a sense of belonging within a cultural context — that I am working within a milieu where I am, in fact, not isolated — and solitude is so easily felt when working in experimental film because there is so little recognition. That’s how I got started on the landscape and it has reached a point now where I am teaching a course at UPEI called “Art, Technology and the Landscape.”

The technology part of that comes from Kroher’s influence after he introduced me to such writers as William Lethis, George Grant and others. This is what sparked the new interest in the landscape. After all we’re not talking about the Group of Seven vision here. What’s interesting now is that after six or 70 years after the Group of Seven is that the effects of technology are becoming more apparent. We are looking at a new kind of landscape — a post-industrial landscape. It’s sort of what’s left over after the initial optimism of the futurists who idolized technology among other things. So let’s take a look at that technological idealism after it has aged 60 or 70 years and after all we have been through under its increasing dominance. For instance in the Group of Seven days you had nature on the one hand which was largely untamed and awesome, and on the other hand you had the promise of technology which was somehow comforting and reassuring, but I think now, 70 years later, we have a very different outlook on technology.

Cinema Canada: Reference to the Group of Seven’s work, freeing landscapes and the absence of technology — I would like you to reflect and comment on Santa’s La Region centrale where there is an absolute absence of technology, accepting the fact that the film is made with highly advanced technological equipment, but only in comparison with the sort of technology that the Group of Seven used to represent the landscape. In other words, it’s not the means of representation here but what is being represented. Santa’s landscape is earthartner to the Group of Seven’s — nothing but a few lichens, a lake and some rock and dirt.

Rick Hancox: I think a more interesting comparison would be between the Group of Seven’s landscapes and the Canadian landscapes of the American artist Milton Avery. My interpretation of them was that Avery was always looking down on these little fishing villages on the Gaspe. Now this is partly because I think he was in awe and perhaps even afraid of the sea, so he stood a considerable distance from it. But also the high angle in film making is always considered to be the dominating one — that it’s the element of a landscape, which is a kind of a subjective view. And cinema is an even more profound aspect of that because it takes it one step further. It takes this notion of photographic presence and absence further because it is now projected on the screen as an illusion. That is what I mean by mediation, not so much an agreement between a vehicle through which one thing... one element... can know the other. Now I don’t know if nature knows consciousness that way, but we can certainly know nature we can deal with... we can discover our own relation to it, and then we can turn around and present that relationship to others. It is a vital way for us to “survive” just as the technology of all transportation was a way for the nation to survive. According to Maurice Charland in his essay “Technological Nationalism” it is the way we continue to survive, as a nation, through the rhetoric the technology itself generates. We are a nation founded on technology and we depend on it to survive as a state. And I keep thinking here on another figure who deals with the railroad — Charland opens up his article with a quote from one of his songs — Gordon Lightfoot. The quote is, “There was a time in this fair land When the railroad didn’t run.”

But there is another one that keeps coming to mind from his railroad trilogy, and it goes, “Long before the white man and long before the wheel. When the cold dark forest was too silent to be real.”

It wasn’t real until we represented it. We couldn’t represent it until the technology or the technique to represent it came along. That is the technique of the Group of Seven, the technique of the railroad that allowed us to get there, and more recently the technology of the National Film Board, which is technology that Maurice doesn’t mention, but it’s there and it happened in all the church basements across Canada. It’s more than just any technology... it’s not just an accident that it’s photographic technology that’s the most profound, because its very nature can somehow deal with the contradictions that are so much a part of our sense of being a nation.

Experimental film and Canadian identity

Cinema Canada: How does the fact that you are an experimental filmmaker who has won numerous awards and recognition for your work, you have had so little or no critical attention in Canada?

Rick Hancox: Well, maybe part of it is my own fault. I really haven’t pushed or promoted my work. It’s impossible to make a living at it so I don’t go around putting together glossy brochures or firing off resumes everywhere, trying to hit people over the head with it. I’m not involved in the kind of publicity campaign that the Funnel was once involved in, for example. The Funnel realized that if you were going to succeed with experimental film in Canada, you would have to promote it aggressively. The danger with trumpeting up a lot of publicity and rhetoric, of course, is that you have to follow through, sooner or later, with good work. I didn’t really have the time for that sort of campaign and I preferred to actually make the films. If you make good films, eventually they will generate the interest. I would rather have it that way; otherwise I wouldn’t have an accurate barometer of how I was being received.

Cinema Canada: Now that there is an increased interest in your films, wouldn’t you like to take the opportunity to get out and push them more?

Rick Hancox: No. I still need the time to make them. That stuff takes too much time away from my production.
experimental films? Even video art has trouble and people have VCRs. But set up a 16mm film projector in your home? Even in art galleries the screenings only last one night. Now you see it, now you don't! Everything is packed up and let's get on with the next thing. Whereas other art exhibitions are hanging on the walls for weeks or months.

Cinema Canada: Funding for experimental film in Canada has been scarce and what little has been forthcoming has been perceived as being guided by a mild form of nepotism in the case of the National Film Board and the Canada Council. Do you agree with that characterization? And how do you fund your films?

Rick Hancox: Are you talking about the Canada Council now...?

Cinema Canada: Well yes, I just read an article by Matthew Fraser in the Globe and Mail that accuses the Canada Council of funding the more well-known and established artists while the struggling unknown artists find it very difficult to get money from the Arts Councils.

Rick Hancox: My view is that the Canada Council is doing a very good job with what meagre funds it has. The problem is the way it is awarded. On jury after jury you have many worthy people asking for money and the Council has only a fraction of what they are asking for. So what do you do, chop the number of people who get the money in half or give them half of what they are asking for? The Ontario Arts Council has a separate jury for experimental films and have funded a lot of people. They have been very good. I received one grant from them and one from the Canada Council. But the main problem is that compared to the amount of money goldilocks Telefilm Canada has, the Canada Council's funds are minimal. I mean, what are we quibbling about? Let's not quibble about individual artists who deserve the money...let's get a bigger piece of the pie! I think the figure for the cost of building one mile of the 401 highway exceeded the entire budget of the Ontario Arts Council.

Cinema Canada: Yes, so again, with Telefilm Canada, you go back to what Elder says referring to this obsession with developing an indigenous feature film industry which would appear, in some perverse manner, as our national identity. It has an enormous budget and it funds mostly American productions being made here in order to take advantage of the tax breaks, the lower value of the dollar, and Telefilm Canada. So in fact this idea of an indigenous culture is being undermined by foreign American films.

Rick Hancox: Isn't there a realization here yet, like in Australia and Britain, that in order to have a successful cinema, commercially, we should proceed with exactly the opposite strategy; that is, we should make films about ourselves, about our localities...about what we know best. A lot of the commercial films that I can think of were made out of their way to hide the fact that they were filmed in Canada. But if I think that the Canadian identity has been carved out in the independent film scene since the 1960s. Our experimental film, our documentary film, even our short fiction. And what happens to all these films? There is nowhere to show them. But that doesn't mean that they shouldn't be looked at and taken seriously. Because right in our backyards, right under our noses we might have the cinema that we need! I'm teaching a course in independent Canadian cinema next year as a matter of fact, that will deal with many of these issues.

Cinema Canada: And what about you? How do you fund your films?

Rick Hancox: First of all my films are very short so they don't cost very much. I've made longer films and the films I'm working on now are longer so I'm going to have to get some grants in order to finish them. But the recent series of films, the poetry films, didn't cost very much. I do most of the work myself. I didn't have any high shooting ratios. I didn't have to rent any equipment because Sheridan College was a willing participant. The institutions where I have taught have been very kind in lending me cameras and editing facilities. And I have had students volunteer to work on my films because they enjoy it. Some of my own money goes into them of course.

Cinema Canada: So apart from the two grants that you mentioned earlier, you haven't received any government funding.

Rick Hancox: And haven't asked for it either. Part of that is because I haven't known how to ask for it. And that's because of the flap in the system. When you work the way that I do, which is what Elder calls the empirical style of filmmaking, you don't really know how something is going to turn out. You don't have a neat little script all preconceived that you can hand a jury. I don't have anything. I just start shooting. And when all you have is a bunch of footage, the only thing you can apply for is a completion grant. That means you submit work in progress and everybody knows that's like committing suicide. It doesn't look at all like what it's going to look like in the end. I just don't know where I'm going with my films until they are finished and sometimes after they are finished. When I get a chance to show them to people and get some feedback, that's when I begin to understand fully what I have created.

Recent works and postmodernism

Cinema Canada: Home For Christmas like Reunion in Dunnville, although they themselves are very different from each other, is very different than your later films, the poetry films. These later films are the ones that you are more known for and they are the ones that you show exclusively now. With a few exceptions, yet there is an autobiographical dimension in Home For Christmas as there is in the poetry films. But it is much more evident, more demonstrati-
what I was really doing before I got into film and it was what really catapulted me into working with film as a way to extend my poetry interests. Now here was poetry, back again, serving to extend and improve upon my visual productions. I had actually rediscovered Wallace Stevens who was a major influence on me when I was doing poetry... and again, Stevens' idea of the balance between reason and imagination was something I tried to achieve in Waterfront, with the lush imagery being the imagination and the overlaid poetry appealing to the reason. In fact I even used a Stevens poem in that film. Once I had finished that, I began to apply a similar process to the footage of LANDFALL and Beach Events which I had shot years before. I found a D.G. Jones poem and used it in LANDFALL and, not finding anything suitable for Beach Events, I finally wrote something myself. So the works I'm doing now, the Moose Jaw film and another one called Arden, are all going to utilize language. In these three poetry films I use a voiceover or captions superimposed on the image. In all three language fulfills a graphic function as well as representing reason, in the Stevens sense. In Waterfront, for instance, the words on the screen are superimposed over the imagery and are literally interfering with the background, which the viewer is seeing for the second time around. Some people ask me why I did that because they got the sense of the film when they saw the images the first time... so they ask why did I say these words over the screen and ruin their chance to enjoy those images again? My response is that is exactly what memory does. It's the same thing. It gets in the way. We have to always recall something through the paraphernalia of experience.

Cinema Canada: When you refer to graphics in LANDFALL, you mean it immediately. You have very strongly in the graphic with the superimpositions and double exposures, and at the same time you have superimposed poetry over this already complicated imagery... and it appears to me to be your most playful, if not outrageous use of language with phrases appearing on different parts of the screen... coming in from one side and disappearing through a vanishing point perspective... even phrases entering from the bottom of the screen, upside down, and exiting at the top. What did you have in mind when you were doing these things?

Rick Hans: Well the imagery was spinning around and perhaps I thought the words should too. But it also has to do with the meaning of the poem. "There Are No Limits." I thought there were limits, but in fact there were not only no limits to the emotions Doug Jones was feeling when he wrote the poem, but there are also no limits to the way that language can be used and represented in a film. Why not have it upside down? In fact, if you think about it, in the same poetry, it becomes an open invitation to play around with the vertical orientation of the words. It's reminiscent of concrete poetry. I just think it's doing is using language in that way - if you're going to use words on the screen - you are naturally forced to consider things like where they are going to appear, their movement, their disappearance, and just as important, I think, the front or typscript you are going to use. Maybe it's also the heritage of Snow and the playfulness in his work.

Cinema Canada: The phenomenon of post modernism has been a preoccupation with many modern-day thinkers. Some of them see postmodernism as an overreaction to the conditions and productions of the postmodern society which fosters in a way a "hypermodern" or "ultramodern" where technology seems to be a dominating force in everyday life. First of all, do you respond to this view of thinking and secondly, what significance does the technological penetration of our lives have for you... or... how do you deal with it in your work?

Rick Hans: The term postmodernism and the continuing quest to define it don't really have a lot of influence on me. As far as I can understand it really means all things to all people. What you want it to be. The thing I like about the way Kraoke uses it is that he uses it to pick out certain artists, periods or works of art from modern which I think represent postmodernism... even if it is somebody like de Chirico, the Italian surrealist painter, or the American painter Edward Hopper, who were both, for Kroker, probably more postmodern than many who followed them. I think that's a more sensible way of dealing with postmodernism. It seems to be a working for which the optimism of modernism has worn off. It's what's left over after the optimism for technology - which was so prevalent during the early part of the century - has aged and turned into the deconstruction and mistrust. The best thing about the term postmodernism is that, unlike modernism, it is not a closed-ended term, it is not reductive. Because it can mean all things to all people. It's actually something that can be quite useful. Ironically, modernism, which has the veneer of being so open, so free, so new, has, in fact, very narrow limits. Postmodernism has encouraged and reawakened a whole new interest in art in the attempts to go beyond the limits of modernism, which seemed to have a sort of complacency with technology. We still have a lot of modernists left over. They are neo-Futurists. They are the people who talk about the micro chip and how everything is going to be reduced into digital memory somehow. Film and video, for example, will all merge into one sort of "bev" or "bev" of digitalized information that we can supposedly control at will. The term that's used so often in computer graphics is the "virtual" camera. I spent some time at Sheridan College studying computer graphics, interactive media and other new technologies, because that was one of the big threats of that institution whose motto was "One step ahead". We all got swept up in the computer revolution of the early '80s, but no one ever questioned this new technology. There was this feeling that - in fact it was more than just a feeling, it was a policy - that didn't jump on this new technology handwagon you would be left behind in the dust. Either you would be a "techno-peasant" or someone who was in "control". That is an example of how new technology doesn't provide us with the opportunity for a more democratic society. While giving the impression of freedom, liberty and choice, it is actually more restricting, oppressive and in fact limits those choices. The only choice that it offers is consumer choice. And it's like I said before, film is shrinking in its commercial marketability, but it is becoming more significant as an art form. It has become, like Arthur Koestler pointed out, a residual art form, like painting after the advent of photography. It is in a privileged position to comment on the advancement of technology. It can step outside of it now, mechanical technologies are important precisely because they are residual - because they are on the fringe. I think that experimental film is facing its biggest challenge in the face of the new electronic technology.

Cinema Canada: So you see postmodernism as a liberating force with its tendency to lift things from various historical periods, collapsing them into this sort of "hyper" pluralism, to use a Krokerism...?

Rick Hans: Well, I think it is. But it depends on what side of the postmodern stance you are on. If you are a scholar, a critic, or an artist it means you are no longer shackled to the narrow terms which define what can or cannot be art. But if you are a member of the postmodern consumer society and do not have the privilege of knowing how to make use of artistic expression, and do not have the tools at your command or don't have the education, then postmodernism - a term for which you probably have no use if indeed you have even heard of it - would apply simply to a condition of advanced capitalism, which isn't actually a lot of fun for people who are really sucked into it.

Cinema Canada: You're now working on a project about Moose Jaw, a place you spent a great deal of time as a child, and more recently a place you have been returning to quite frequently. How far along is that project?

Rick Hans: Moose Jaw. I'm very excited about this project. I have been working on it for several years now. I've done a lot of shooting... I've done a lot of research too. I spent a lot of time there growing up in the '50s. Most of the footage has been shot within the last few years. But the thing about Moose Jaw is that it is not just any childhood town. First of all I grew up in the post-war optimism of the '50s when Moose Jaw was still a part of the western frontier. The West was a place where people didn't think very much about the past, mainly because they were so much hope for economic development and opportunity. The West was really opening up and Moose Jaw was still a frontier town. Unfortunately, Regina was built too close to Moose Jaw and it eventually became the capitol. So towards the end of the '50s you have Moose Jaw losing out to Regina in terms of population. The population of Moose Jaw has not grown since the end of the '50s. Then the railway began its decline as a passenger carrier, losing out the airlines and eventually the Moose Jaw operation moved to Winnipeg. Several other industries closed down after that. So the technologies that had given Moose Jaw its drive put an end to it. But the technology in its decline happened to coincide with my departure. I left Moose Jaw at the end of the '50s at the age of 11. When I went back there to shoot film it was very sad. In a town where nobody ever thought much about the past, the motto now - for a downtown revitalization project is "Moose Jaw. There's future in our past." This is not a very sad testament. It shows that the frontier has really ended when you have reached this wall and you are forced to look back and start exploring the past through various museums in a sort of attempt to attract the tourist dollar. Museums are everywhere. The only hope for new economic development seems to lie in "freezing" all the old technologies by restoring them to a pristine condition - that they never had anyway - and then charging tourists to look at it. What really hurts is that this is where my childhood took place. So I go back to this place and it is like being in a weird dream. I toy with one person there now - an artist. As a matter of fact, everyone else I knew has left. So I am going to try and make a film which turns around a dialectic of personal memory and feeling with the universal, public record of history in newspapers, town documents and brochures, etc. I will read many of these images. But mixed in with all of this... is the memory of my childhood and the memories of that place that once seemed quite exciting. It's a genuine feeling of loss to go and see the past in a museum. It's very hard for me to talk about it, except whereas to say a lot of things have moved around in space and time and are under a different light. More past is in a museum. It's very hard for me to talk about it, except whereas to say a lot of things have moved around in space and time and are under a different light.