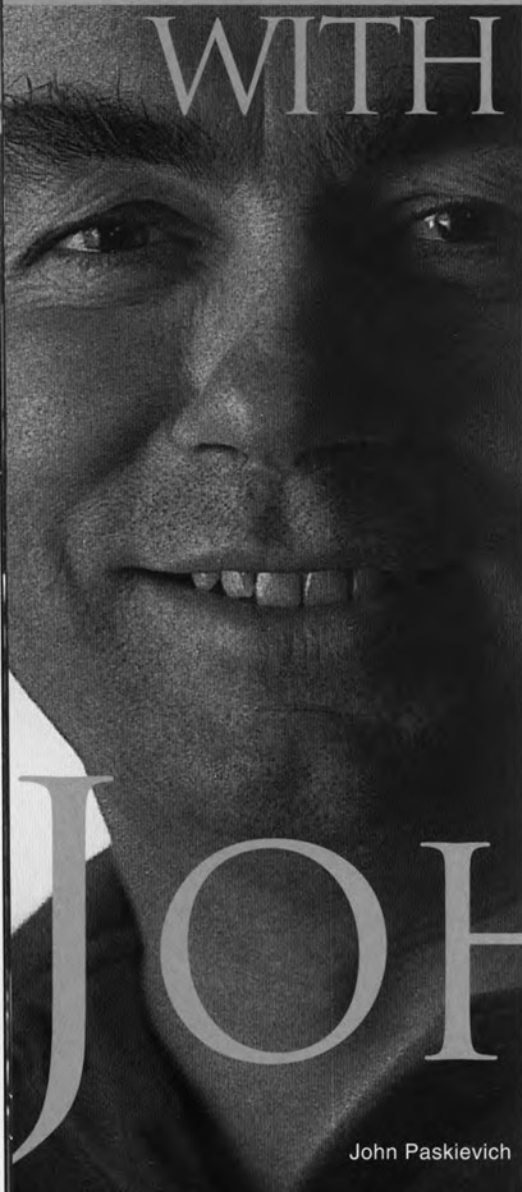


# INTERVIEW

# JOHN WALKER IN CONVERSATION WITH



John Paskievich

The following fragments of an interview are based on a two-hour conversation I had with John Paskievich in a Hungarian restaurant one evening, deep in the heart of Winnipeg in March of 1997. After 45 minutes, John and I were patting ourselves on the back—impressed by our humour, wit and succinct sound bites. As I went to turn the tape over to record another brilliant round of dialogue, I discovered, to my chagrin, that I had forgotten to flip the “on” switch. Documentary filmmakers have to live with the knowledge that we are constantly missing the best material; this is what fascinates us about the medium; it parallels our life and how we live it. Making documentary films is somewhat like standing in a shooting gallery—75 cents, three shots and good luck to you! The best thing about John’s films is that they offer rare insights into the world he records. *The Old Believers*, *Sedna—The Making of a Myth* and *If I Were an Indian* reveal truths about their subjects in a manner unique in Canadian documentary filmmaking. **John Walker**

**JW** *Many unique films come out of Winnipeg. There is a particular sense of humour here. Do you feel that you gain anything from living here?*

**JP** Why am I in Winnipeg? Because my family is here and because when I started working in still photography I got my material from here. The material in the West inspires me somehow. If things changed, and I couldn’t make a living here, then I would go elsewhere.

*I think the interesting thing about your films is that you deal with specifics, a specific place or a specific people, and you always imbue your approach with a larger look at society or life. A lot of documentary filmmakers document something—an issue, a thing—but you’re not documenting the thing, you’re documenting something else. You take a much more poetic approach.*

For lack of better words, I like spiritual topics, the idea of the human spirit. The great 19th-century novelist Dostoyevsky asked this question: Why does someone who has been brought up in a nice environment, a person who should be the happiest person in

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# JOHN PASKIEVICH

the world, why does this person do exactly the opposite of what is expected? Why does a rich person give up all his possessions and become a monk? Why does the son or daughter of a wealthy family give it all up and become a drunk or a debaucher who likes to hang out with prostitutes? The answer is because they're looking for something else.

*They're looking for meaning?*

They're looking for meaning and that always intrigues me. In my own work, I'm looking for meaning in my own life. We all are. It's our natural condition.

*Is that why you turned to documentary filmmaking, to find that meaning?*

It was by accident. I was doing a photography exhibit of a grocery store. I was going to have pictures on the wall and a soundscape in the room. The idea became, well, I have sound and pictures, so why don't I make a movie? I went to Michael Scott at the Film Board here and asked him if he was interested and to my surprise he was. But no one else was, so it took about five years to get that little 10-minute film [*Ted Baryluk's Grocery*] made. A little movie with still pictures and sound.

*When I was making Strand: Under the Dark Cloth, which took me many, many years, I was at the Film Board talking to Wolf Koenig. Did he help you with the animation camera?*

He just helped by being himself.

*He said I should see the Baryluk film. I got it out and had a look at it.*

Wolf was so full of enthusiasm. He would never say this won't work. He would always say just go ahead and do it.

*I think what saddens me about the Film Board now is that people who had the enthusiasm and the love of filmmaking have left. Do you feel that the Film Board is home for you, in terms of being a place where you can work?*

Earlier on it was. It was exciting. I was naive and other people were naive and it was exciting. But since then a lot of people I was making films with have left the business. The whole Film Board has been downsized.

*Do you think you will leave the business?*

It's a hard business. I'm not interested in ideological battles. I think the whole curse of the 20th century is ideological battles, which only have resulted in horrors on both the right and left, and



## THE OLD BELIEVERS

they have carried over here to Canada. John Grierson came here and said film should be a hammer. Well, a hammer should be a hammer. Film can be anything a filmmaker wants it to be. But this sort of propagandistic battle that John Grierson brought to the Film Board resulted in films of a certain kind being made. Not exclusively, but mostly the films were about the rich exploiting the poor, the whites exploiting the non-whites and so on. It's an ongoing theme. There was some excellent work done, but there was a whole lot of earnest tediousness as well.

*You say you're interested in issues of the human spirit, spiritualism if you like. Are you a religious person?*

That's a question you're not supposed to ask at the Film Board, but the answer is yes.

All photos courtesy of John Paskievich

# SKIEVICH

# INTERVIEW

WITH

# JOHN PASKIE WICHI

*I thought so from seeing your films. It has become very unpopular to be religious, in a sense.*

To be religious in the world of film is to be a reactionary fool.

*I got quite a laugh in *The Old Believers*. You see them eating in the kitchen and your commentary says that they see you, the filmmaker, as a pagan and therefore won't invite you to the dinner table. You then cut to a shot of yourself eating a piece of bread alone in their living room. Your point of view is not yet clear, so you begin to wonder about these people. In your films you reveal the truth of your subjects slowly, so that it adds to a dramatic tension. In the end, what I see in all your films is a deep, profound respect for your subjects.*

I like my subjects. I only do films on subjects I like.

*What was it that you were looking for in *The Old Believers*? What were you trying to uncover?*

I'm from an Ukrainian background, which is similar to the Old Believers—all the various superstitions they have, the way they look at the cosmos. It just reminded me of my own upbringing and through their epic story you can actually understand what used to be known as Communist Russia. It's like a direct line from the Old Believers to Brezhnev. Russian Communism was in many ways a perverted, secularized Orthodoxy where God was simply replaced by Man.

*It is an interesting film because you are sympathetic to a subject that many filmmakers might look at in a negative way. Generally we are very suspicious of people who are religious. In a sense Andrei Tarkovsky was on the same path with his films *Andrei Roublev* and *The Mirror*. As a Russian who had experienced some of the worst aspects of human behaviour he ends up making films that pursue the poetic and spiritual aspects of life. If you explore subjects that are personal, inside yourself, you end up pursuing some sort of spiritual path.*

Yes, a spiritual path or an antispiritual path. A lot of art is antispiritual, it's nihilistic. The Russians have this unique cultural take on life. In Russia, suffering has meaning. In the West, suffering has no meaning and should be eliminated. When individuals suffer in our culture, they suffer on their own. Everything is geared toward eliminating suffering, or suffering is turned into entertainment. We respond to a famine in Ethiopia if it is accompanied by a rock concert.

*Do you feel you are influenced by that?*

Very much so. My parents were both orphans and they have horror stories about life under Stalin and Hitler. The suffering was awful, but that's the story of human life. I would like it to be otherwise. The progressives say that it will be otherwise if we do this or that. I don't believe them because the path to Hell is paved with good intentions. For example, Communism was this wonderful, rational thing that created horrors unimaginable. For me, what we learned from Communism is the nature of suffering.

*I think Canadians, or North Americans for that matter, are quite naive politically as a result of this lack of suffering. I think it is interesting in your final statement in *The Old Believers* that what is going to swallow these people up is not the suffering and the tragedies that they've gone*

◀ *A Place Called Swine on a Road Called Sorrow*



through but it is materialism and abundance. The irony is that, as a culture, we are being consumed by abundance. That was a wonderful way to end that film, because you can watch this film about *Old Believers*, yet at the end you allow the audience a perspective on the culture we are living in. It was a way of looking at two cultures. You put it in perspective, their culture and our own daily lives.

That was the idea, so that you would see that these people are not fools; they're not like us, but they're not at all fools. They're perfectly intelligent people.

*What was the reaction to the film?*

The reaction was mixed. Some people found it fascinating and other people sent letters to the CBC saying that this is where the policy multiculturalism has taken us. We let these kind of people into the country.

*What harm are they doing? You can't explain these things, instead you should just show them.*

The best films don't explain. When I explain my films to someone it's embarrassing, but people want explanations.

*Particularly journalists and broadcasters, and this is a problem with this kind of filmmaking. I feel that I can never really talk about the film I am making. It's not about A equals B equals C, which is what broadcasters are looking for, it's about something that is unexplainable that you're trying to imbue with life. Would you like to talk about the film you're working on now about Gypsies?*

I'm doing a film [working title: *A Place Called Swine on a Road Called Sorrow*] in Slovakia about some Gypsies who live in a totally grotesque settlement right next to a prosperous town. By exploring the life in these two communities I hope to tell the story of the Gypsies in Eastern Europe.

*What was the response from [CBC's] Witness?*

The response was absolutely no interest. They think I am going to do an ethnographic film, another slow-paced film, and that's not the kind of material they want. They want hard-hitting stuff. I think this film will be hard-hitting.

*Can you tell me what role has the Film Board played in your filmmaking?*

For me, if there wasn't the National Film Board I wouldn't have been able to make the films that I have made. My films are not commercial. They are not about topics that television likes. They are not in-your-face films about issues; they're about seemingly marginal topics, about certain things which, in Canada, television

documentaries ignore. If it were not for the NFB, they wouldn't have been made. I think what has happened, because the Film Board has been under so much pressure, is that now it's taken the route where a film has to have a TV license in order to get made. What's going to happen is that all its films are going to be geared for the approval of *Witness* and it's no longer about the filmmaker. The NFB has always been a place where you could work as an independent, as an artist. But now, if you make films for television, the broadcaster calls all the shots. The CBC people are not filmmakers, they're journalists.

*The Old Believers was shown on TV as a special, wasn't it?*

CBC always has, or it used to have, an Easter or Christmas special and *The Old Believers* happened to fit this slot, so it ran there.

*And Sedna: The Making of a Myth, was that shown to the CBC?*

When *Sedna* was shown to the CBC, Adrienne Clarkson was interested in it, but she thought it wouldn't work as an hour film, so she was only willing to put up money for half-an-hour. But I didn't think half-an-hour was the right length so I managed to get TVO interested and it put up a broadcast licence for an hour.

*Wasn't If I Were an Indian done in the same way as Sedna? You got Telefilm involved and TVO was the broadcaster.*

TVO was only one of the broadcasters. We got Saskatchewan, CFCF in Montreal, CKY in Winnipeg and CFCN in Calgary. It was easier with *Sedna* because the broadcaster was only TVO.

*So, in fact, making films and becoming better at it doesn't make it any easier in the fundraising department.*

I never know how it is done. You would think if you do it once, the second time would be easier, but it's just as hard. People change, policies change, you meet with different personalities, people with different interests, it's always hard. Then you get into situations where you extract some funds from people and if the film is a success, you almost get a feeling of resentment.

*What is at the root of that do you think?*

I don't know. It's bizarre. The industry in Canada is built on government money and whenever you talk about government you talk about politics. So I think the funding agencies, the CBC and NFB, the people in charge of these places, are as much interested where their careers are going as they are interested in the particular films they are funding. Too often the films they choose to fund are films that will improve their little fiefdom. At least in the realm of commercial filmmaking, which I know nothing about, but I assume that if the film makes money and sells commercials, you can do that again and again until you stop making money. Then they will get someone else who can make money. But in these government-funded organizations, what is their criteria for judging the film? If you go there for money and happen to be a guy with an artistic success, they'll tell you you're not making any money for us, we're not in the art business. But if you have a commercial success, then they'll say we're not in the business of funding schlock. Someone once said, Canada has the worst of the American-style of filmmaking and the old USSR system, the worst of both worlds.

# INTERVIEW

*Commercialism on the one hand and state domination on the other, all filmmakers express the same frustration.*

I'm not saying this is unique to me. It's everybody that I speak too.

*What do you think of a lot of the documentaries being made?*

In this country, it's the legacy of John Grierson. It's part of that left legacy that says films should be revolutionary. I've yet to see a left revolution that has been successful, where the people openly and democratically hail its accomplishments. I don't know of such a place. I find all this stuff a misguided religious impulse. It's missionary. It's the sons and daughters of these Scottish missionaries who had a religious impulse, a rather dour and puritanical religious impulse, and their grandchildren continue that legacy, and then it becomes a social impulse and it becomes warped. These people find the bad guys and condemn them to hell and as viciously as any rightist, and then they feel sanctimonious because they are on the side of angels.

*I think that's why when I saw your films I liked them so much because you are not making films from a narrow political point of view. Your sensibility, as I would describe it, is much more Eastern European. The story is between the lines, it's not clear. You made a*

*documentary about the making of a myth, the Sedna myth, but you didn't talk about the myth, you didn't explain the myth, you didn't turn it into folklore, you just experienced the myth, you lived the myth. In that approach you revealed something. You revealed the potential. So, for me, the film is about the potential of art, the potential of the artist, the potential of myth and the potential of the existence of the gods. I was blown away.*

Thank you. That's a big compliment coming from you. I admire your films very much. In your Strand film you managed to avoid the obvious clichés and made a film about how a miserable S.O.B. can be a great artist, which is infinitely more true and fascinating.

*That's why Eastern European films are so interesting to me because they're not focused on the black-and-white stories.*

They can't be, because those people experienced Hitler and Stalin. There's your right and there's your left. They're the same thing. Those two understood each other perfectly.

*So you experience these two extremes, abandon politics and just try and make films as best you can.*

I get pleasure and honesty out of life. I'm not unaware of politics, but I don't see life as merely some kind of political gesture or posture. ■

## ***Sedna: The Making of a Myth.***

**The film is about the potential of art, the potential of the artist, the potential of myth and the potential of the existence of the gods.**

