

BY Tom McSorley

Time and Space **STATIONS**

Goin' down the Rails with

Harold Innis would have loved *Stations*. Canada's acclaimed economist, historian and groundbreaking media philosopher (1894–1952), upon whose strong foundations the more gossamer pronouncements of Marshall McLuhan are built, once speculated that as technological media of communication become lighter—from stone tablets to papyrus to paper to the unbearable lightness of the internet—they extend across an ever-increasing spatial field.¹ They are space-biased. A consequence of this, argued Innis, is that they de-emphasize time, favouring immediacy over continuity, now over then, unlike more time-biased forms of communication such as oral storytelling, song and music. For Innis, the danger inherent in the spatially biased media of communication is the removal of time itself from the cultural equation and from our attitudes toward social organization, political evolution and economic sustainability. In other words, once you chop up time into nanoseconds or imagine the world to exist in time as quarterly stock market reports, you will experience serious social and cultural imbalances.

William D. MacGillivray's overlooked and quietly astonishing debut feature rumbles down the rails right through the heart of these imbalances. It explores the time and the space that is Canada; it explores how Canada is imagined by those who populate it and by those who control its media systems; it explores how Canadian cinema has both reflected and deformed our sense of ourselves. From its detonation of regional stereotypes about Atlantic Canada offered up in *Goin' down the Road* and elsewhere, *Stations* is a perceptive examination of the seismic, accelerated shift from time-based conceptions of knowledge and nation to ones more spatially promiscuous and nationally tenuous. At one level, *Stations* is about the beginning, the middle and the end of Canada, but, as Godard would say, not necessarily in that order.

Released in 1983, following MacGillivray's impressive 59-minute drama, *Aerial View* (1979), *Stations* stretches its intensely personal drama across the entire landscape of Canada. Set on a train trip from British Columbia to Newfoundland, *Stations* revolves around a troubled televi-

sion journalist, Tom Murphy (played to alienated perfection by Newfoundland filmmaker Mike Jones), as he travels from Vancouver with a cameraman to a difficult family reunion and funeral in St. John's. Murphy's personal journey, initiated and haunted by the suicide of Harry (Richard Boland), a close friend and former colleague in a Catholic seminary, is further complicated by his television station's assigning him to make a documentary, to capture aspects of the Canadian identity from coast to coast. With its fragmented narrative structure, existential uncertainty and meditative modalities, *Stations* is reminiscent of early Wim Wenders films like *Alice in the Cities*, *Wrong Movement* and *Kings of the Road*. Its explorations of identity, memory and the relationship between individual and landscape are, however, quintessentially Canadian.

In addition, its investigation of the function and significance of image making (television, Polaroid snapshots, home movies, etc.) to understand and articulate personal, national, even regional, identities gives the film a rich self-reflexive dimension. It firmly places *Stations* at the beginning of the technologically obsessive *Zeitgeist* of English-Canadian feature dramas of the early and mid-1980s, alongside works by Cronenberg, Gruben, Egoyan, Mettler and others. Balancing this interrogation of technologies of image making, there is a concern for the cultural force of orality in the form of songs, conversations and personal interviews structured into the film. As an image-based culture is—according to Innis's formulation—a space-biased one that distorts our sense of time and an oral-based culture is time-biased, *Stations* is a prescient exploration of the contemporary cultural struggle between temporal and spatial forms of communication. Consistently intelligent, restlessly inquisitive of its own powers of representation, and visually authoritative, *Stations* investigates the complex and specifically Canadian cultural relationship between time and space.

Stations is a compendium of space-biased communications technologies. From the train (itself a potent space conquering technological force in Canadian history and culture) to the



television camera that records the journey to the telephones, the microphones, the cameras that punctuate and describe the personal space of those on the train, the film depicts a Canada in motion, in flux across vast spaces. Tom Murphy's journey takes place in the interstices in-between. On the one hand, there are his interior struggles over Harry's suicide and his estrangement from his father and, on the other, his professional exterior, interviewing "ordinary Canadians" with his cameraman as they travel from Vancouver to Halifax. This narrative journey takes place physically and psychologically across space, but it is anchored in time.

For all the technologically produced and overdetermined media constructions of knowledge that are spatially biased (represented especially by the television documentary Tom is ordered to make), *Stations* argues for a balance with the temporal by both insinuating and insisting upon oral forms of expression. These are located in the film in the many conversations Tom has with various people, all of whom complicate his personal and professional project. "You're not who you appear to be, Mr. Murphy," says a lonely woman (Beth McTavish) he encounters and mocks after hearing about her troubled life. "Stories are boring," says another passenger, "played" by fabled documentary filmmaker, Robert Frank, after Tom tells him he is a journalist trying to do a story. The VIA Rail porter's, Bernard Cloutier, intriguing theories about the four great concepts of modern civilization, "capitalism, communism, socialism and railroadism," are also explained orally. Oral forms are also present and insistent in Tom's disturbing dream about his mother; in the home-movie images of his induction ceremony at the seminary; in a guitar-playing passenger's song that tells of father-son conflict stretched over time. Most potently, time is inscribed in Tom's filmed interview with Harry, who tells Tom of his confusion and anguish after leaving the seminary, of how he has been unable to find a secular identity upon which to build a new life. All of these exchanges create doubt and ambiguity in Tom's mind as his personal crises begin to bleed into his professional life.

While these examples may be seen to denote the presence of the temporal, in the Innisian sense, its insinuation is to be experienced, indeed discovered, in the film's formal structure. Peter Harcourt has noted that while the film has "...a beginning, a middle, and an end, this structure does not correspond to the narrative time of the film. It is not just that there are flashbacks or flashforwards: the film[']s narrative strategies cannot be explained in this way.... *Stations*

refuse[s] any sense of an unfolding present tense."² This refusal, emphasized at a formal level, foregrounds our consciousness of time as a construct while it examines the epistemological implications of that awareness. It is not simply a question of how we know what we know, or what the film discloses to us, but rather an investigation of how we construct our understanding of things in time and, given the pan-Canadian settings of the film's narrative journey, across space. As spectators, we are made aware of the process of becoming aware, and of how over the duration of the film our knowledge of things changes and evolves.

When Tom Murphy arrives in St. John's to face his father at a raucous party held by his sister, Katherine (a young and luminous Mary Walsh), in some sense the spatial and the temporal have merged, and a measure of existential balance is achieved. MacGillivray even alters the structure of the film in this sequence, shifting the narrative's style from fragmentation to linearity. Innis argues that the cultural predominance of spatially biased media of communications, such as television and cinema, contribute to the creation of "monopolies of knowledge" (what American Walter Lippmann later termed "the manufacture of consent") that spread themselves over vast geographical distances and can elide differences, encourage stereotypes and presume to occupy a pre-eminent, centralized, perhaps even "aerial" view.

In *Stations*, then, MacGillivray registers a countervailing temporal emphasis, orally expressed, which affirms complexity, ambiguity and difference in relation to ideas of individuality, technology, otherness, regional identities and stereotypes, and the imagining of Canada itself. As all those strangers on the train are interviewed by Tom Murphy, a man who has moved west and is now headed east, Canada's unique sets of geographical, personal and cultural tensions form a startling and evocative mosaic in motion. Indeed, from its very setting on and off the rails, MacGillivray's *Stations* embodies and examines the search for Canada. And, on both counts, it is no exaggeration to say that *Stations* is a revelation.

TAKE ONE

Notes:

This article is for my parents, who took me across Canada by train several times as a child, and for Peter Harcourt.

1. Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communications* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951).
2. *Cinema Canada*, November 1987, p. 19.

Left and below: Joel Sapp and Michael Jones.

