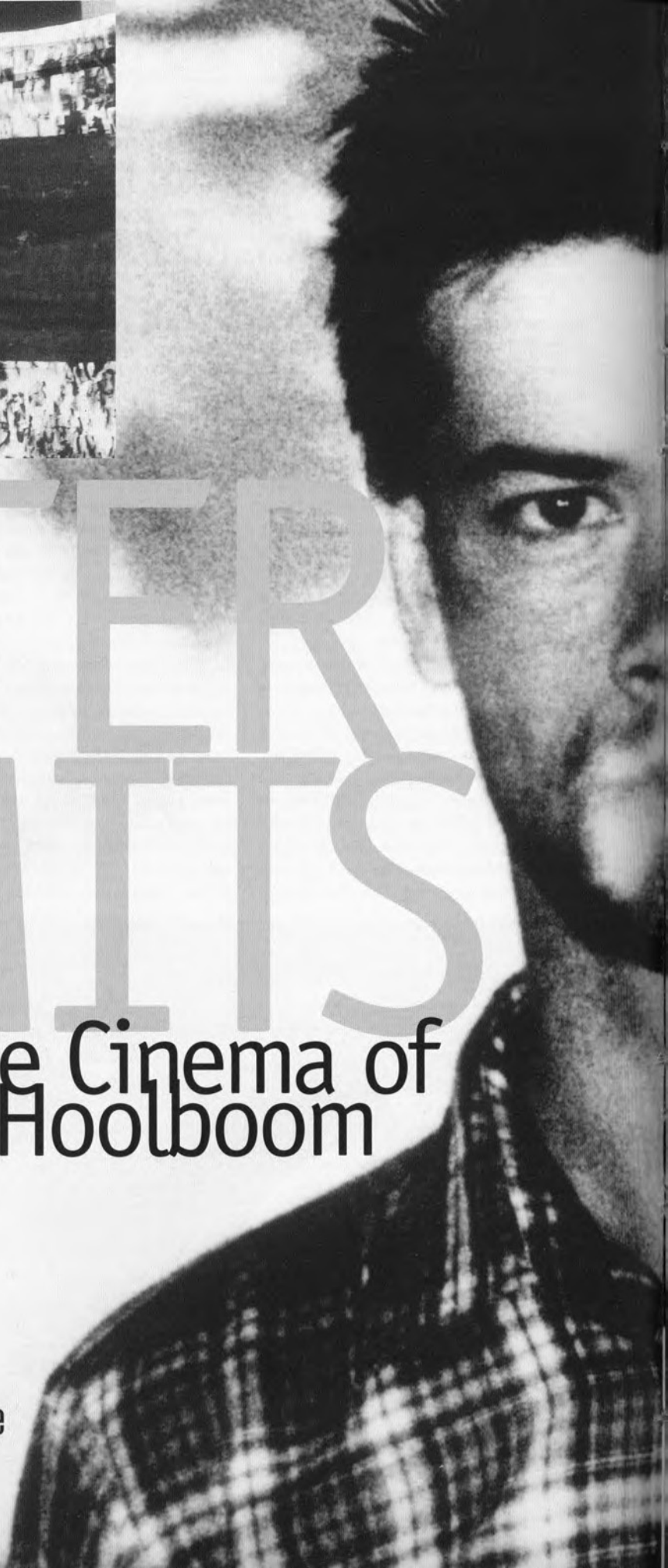


OUTER LIMITS

the Cinema of
Mike Hoolboom

by Geoff Pevere

PHOTOGRAPH OF MIKE HOOLBOOM: BY CARL BROWN
INSETS: KANADA





“My skin is the place where I
stop and something else begins.”
Kanada

▶
I suggest we begin at the end: at the borders that offer
one way to understand one of the most complex and prolif-
ic bodies of work in contemporary Canadian cinema. Since Mike



FROM LEFT, WHITE MUSEUM: ALMOST MASOCHISTICALLY CONFRONTATIONAL; EAT: "AN INTERSECTION OF CONSUMPTIONS"; KANADA: "THE WORSE THINGS GET, THE BETTER THEY LOOK ON TELEVISION"

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Hoolboom began making movies with his father's Super 8, he has demonstrated a consuming interest in navigating the outer limits: of perception, of language, of self, of mechanical reproduction, of bodily sensation and experience (and, most recently and surprisingly, of the

discourse of nationhood).

To ask the questions he asks is to exile oneself to the margins; to be consigned to a cultural periphery reserved for those who stretch the limits of common experience: the criminal, the insane, the addicted, the dying, the avant-garde artist. The "experimental" filmmaker. The fact is that most forms of mainstream cultural expression inhabit a non-reflective comfort zone, from which anything marginal is so distant as to be invisible. Which is the catch of such an artistic calling: to traverse the margins is to choose to dwell there, far from the centre.

Consider the terms we use to contain a rudely uncompromising sensibility like Hoolboom's: avant-garde, radical, experimental—terms which preserve a notion of normal cultural practice while locking their referents outside of it. To experiment is not only to tinker around on the margins of some more fixed and monolithic entity, it implies a perpetually unfinished and frivolously inconsequential activity that never yields results—which is presumably fine by the self-indulgent wankers who engage in such experiments.

It's this dilettantish connotation that most maligns an artist like Mike Hoolboom. Looking back from this particularly busy intersection of his life and

art, one sees as many results as one does experiments. But our cultural language doesn't allow for the possibility of such results—for that world compels us to invite artists like Hoolboom in from the cold. Instead, he's had to learn to hammer ever louder on the door of mainstream cultural practice.

Language—which Hoolboom deploys and deconstructs with such imagination—has become a refuge for the culturally marginalized, who have unsurprisingly learned to forge an armour of critical discourse that functions as yet another border separating them from mainstream comprehension. Critical discourse keeps the same distance from the middle as the work it engages with—a development which again serves to exile and isolate. Lacking the proper language for the interpretation of avant-garde work, mainstream critics—like myself—rarely venture to discuss it, leaving it instead to those whose words patrol the border between the middle and the fringe.

To approach Hoolboom's work is to wade through intimidating thickets of language. Venture towards 1985's *Book of Lies*, in which Hoolboom uses black frames to distend and reconfigure an airline commercial featuring a diver, and try to disentangle your bootlaces from Jack Rusholme's rhetoric in the astute but burdensome *How to Die: The Films of Mike Hoolboom*: "Here the body dis-

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF MIKE HOOLBOOM



plays itself as an attitude of parts, broken by a machine-made compact of representation, its gestures of ascent subject to a narrative gaze to tumescent arousal and deflation (emblemized by the climber's rise and fall), and viewed as an accumulation of fragments." Who could fault the uninitiated for heading back to Cineplex?

In the same way that he is able to juggle the prosaic with the esoteric in his work, Hoolboom vaults between the colloquial and the arcane when writing on himself. Thus, in his fascinating and demanding exercise in critical autobiography, *Watching Death at Work: My Life in Film*, he is capable of grabbing us by the lapels with such apt and cogent observations as this: "As I watched [Michael Snow's *Wavelength*] flickering between boredom and fascination, it simply seemed to me the first film I'd ever sat before that required my attention." Yet, elsewhere he demonstrates a far less approachable critical humour. Here he is on 1989's *Eat*: "Its archaeologies of superimposition are not an obfuscation of the present but its foundation, its history made manifest, reinvented in a present which is pictured as an intersection of consumptions." I guess when life at the margins is all you've got, in time it starts to feel like home.

It's possible, at this moment—after such recent exercises in dramatic "narra-

tivity" as *Kanada*, *Valentine's Day* and the forthcoming *House of Pain*—that Hoolboom is trying to move in from the margins, and this is at once both surprising and perfectly characteristic of him. This is a filmmaker whose primary aesthetic impulse is the exposure of the limits of discourse: how language circumscribes both identity and behaviour, how images can be contextualized to "mean" just about anything, how narrative film practice represents the systematic elimination of what for Hoolboom is one of the most alluring properties of the photographic image in the first place: its infinite, unknowable ambiguity. Revealingly, in one of his first forays into scripted narrative, the little-seen but fascinating *From Home*, Hoolboom decides to make a fiction from a personal story of a relationship in decline, and then adopts the fictionalizing process as one of the film's key concerns. "Why do we make stories out of such things in the first place?" *From Home* asks, while doing so itself. Then it answers, literally: "We make fiction out of them to make them universal."

Narrative is a social contract, a way the otherwise incomprehensibly subjective experience is arranged according to certain widely shared laws of representation. For Hoolboom, the very act of "narrativizing" is one of radical reduction: it's the elimination of all other interpretive possibilities in favour of the

one privileged by the storyteller. Its aim, like that of so much storytelling, is to control response and interpretation. Elsewhere in *From Home*, his unaffectedly confessional voice-over articulates an essential Hoolboomian epistemology, which itself is reinvented in *White Museum*: "As a filmmaker or a viewer of a film you always begin at the same place, with everything, with every image, and from there you have to make a selection, a choice."

Each choice represents the blocking of yet another angle of interpretation. "What is being left out here?" Hoolboom asks us as we contemplate 1991's *Red Shift*, and in 1981's *Now Yours* he wonders about the artificial credibility bestowed on something merely because it's on film. "If you had anything to say," he asks his audience, "would you be on film?" In his early work, the infinite potential of response is something the films seem to promote. Not just in the way certain images recur from film to film, but in the way they're recontextualized to take on new meaning. Later, as the films move—slowly, with guns drawn—towards dramatic narrative, they will only do so hyper-self-consciously, talking to themselves all the time, like Popeye muttering his way toward another apocalyptic appointment with Brutus.

As to what's characteristic about Hoolboom's recent moves narrative-



LEFT, BABZ CHULA AND GABRIELLE ROSE IN VALENTINE'S DAY: A CYCLE OF HUNGER, INGESTION AND APPETITE; OPPOSITE PAGE, CALLUM RENNIE IN FRANK'S COCK: "THE BODY DOES NOT BELIEVE IN PROGRESS"

ward, consider them the natural extension of his relentless self-consciousness: having moved far enough away from the

of hunger, ingestion and appetite.

Generally speaking, his practice is like a camera that slowly pulls focus to draw more and more into its frame. The early work reflects a kind of poetic subjectivity, as though the artist were drawn to non-narrative practice primarily because it seemed the only reasonable and honest means of representing subjective experience. From this, Hoolboom's work develops a concern with the limits of its own articulation—with the relationship between form and expression—taking the terms of mediated communication as its subject. The concern reaches its most radical and memorable extreme with the almost masochistically confrontational *White Museum*, in which Hoolboom questions, teases, cajoles and lectures his audience for over 30 minutes while we stare at the

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paradigm of "narrativity" to see the machine at work, his artistic impulse has been overtaken by a desire to operate this machinery itself; to see how much improvising it will tolerate before he's pushed back to the margins again. Plus, one sees in Hoolboom's work, and in the breathtaking distance covered by the movement from the intensely subjective *Self-Portrait With Pipe and Bandaged Ear* (1981) to the expansive sociopolitical concerns of *Valentine's Day* (1994), an exhaustive, almost omnivorous cycle

blank white screen of cinema degree zero. At one point his voice asks the projectionist to turn the house lights up so we can see who else is in the auditorium with us—or find our way to the exits—then resumes a meditation on the audacity implied by the simple act of making personal statements for public consumption. "If I want to change the world," he says at a point where many will already have slipped out the back, "I need to be a visionary. If I want the world to change me, I need to learn to listen." He

is being typically modest: it is we who also need to learn to listen, to discover in the white screen the possibility of our own capacity to hear stories and voices that are not contained within the frame of our experience. The white screen is either the butt-end of experimental practice or the threshold of infinite possibility. Or both.

Hoolboom's recent longer works—which are as formally removed from the first-person minimalism of *White Museum* as radio is from painting—are nevertheless almost belligerently verbal, providing his actors with ripely non-naturalistic passages of discourse on art, history, politics, love and (most transgressively and exuberantly) sex. He seems to have struck some form of anxious truce with the words he once found so suspiciously arbitrary and inadequate. Now his characters spew forth ideas ("The body does not believe in progress," says Callum Rennie in *Frank's Cock*) and bon mots ("The worse things get, the better they look on television," says Andrew Scorer as Prime Minister Wayne Gretzky in *Kanada*) with a raging articulateness that recalls, of all things, a radicalized Oliver Stone. (I understand now why Hoolboom is such a *Natural Born Killers* fan: it's like one of his movies with balls instead of brains.)

Gradually, all but the least intrusive visual devices are being stripped away. *Frank's Cock*, which is essentially a one-person monologue presented on a screen split into four images, still demonstrates a lingering suspicion of the hegemony of words. Throughout, the monologue is forced to compete with the images—of

PHOTOGRAPH, ABOVE: BY JOANNA MCDUGALL; PHOTOGRAPH, RIGHT: COURTESY OF MIKE HOOLBOOM

microscopic cellular activity, of Madonna, of hardcore sex—that surround it. In *Kanada*, the dramatic sequences are optically filtered in such a way that compels attention to their form, and punctuated by scenes of an announcer (Hoolboom in a death mask) reading news stories—to illustrate both how the drama we're witnessing becomes media currency, and the absurd cost of that process. Stricken by senility some time in the not-distant-enough future, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien declares his own penis the new unit of imperial measure. *Valentine's Day*, which features two characters first introduced in *Kanada*, does so without the optical filtering, but preserves the masked news reader (this time in a hockey mask). The script from *House of Pain* is the most seemingly straight ahead story so far: minimal use of formal self-reflexiveness, no cutaways to mock news reports. It's enough to make you wonder if even Mike Hoolboom wants his place in the middle.

In the unlikely event that he does, it's difficult to imagine him settling there for long. From the beginning, his practice has been defined by the search for the limits of expression; he's like one of those aquarium fish who spend the entirety of a brief lifetime pushed against the glass. Besides, much in his biography suggests an almost congenital need to question, explore and expose. He has written of growing up beneath a downy blanket of blood spilled along the pathway to that childhood comfort.

The son of a Dutch father—whose name literally translates as “hollow tree” (trees figure prominently as one of his most potently vulnerable symbols of self)—and a Dutch/Indonesian mother, Hoolboom has written harrowingly of his mother's narrow escape from execution when the Japanese invaded her country and sent his grandfather to a concentration camp. Years later, avoiding the draft, his father and mother came to Canada, where they had three children. Later, Mike, the oldest, would include in his work family movies of himself and his siblings, as a lever, prying the doors to memory. (Incidentally, these films were shot on the same Super 8 camera (his father's) that served the filmmaker when he began making his own movies.

As a young man, Hoolboom ingested copious amounts of drug and drink, dabbled in performance art, and finally signed up for film school—in his words, to “wrap myself in the machine of mem-

ory.” From the outset, his film practice was personal, relentless and anti-conventional, but the inevitable poverty and marginalization attendant to such activity merely seemed to compel him to produce (he made 13 films in nine years). The longest film of his early years, the notorious *White Museum*, a 32-minute blank-screen-with-voice-over exercise, uses lack of cash as way of discussing how money makes the reels go round: “I don't have enough money for the images,” he explains to an audience left staring at a blank screen. Later, *From Home* (“the film damn near killed me to make”) was completed with \$8,300 of the filmmaker's largely non-existent personal funds.

In 1989, when Hoolboom learned that he had contracted HIV (“I didn't really handle the news well,” he wrote subsequently with matter-of-fact understatement), it merely intensified his drive. Since, he has completed 27 films, organized experimental conferences and tours, started a film magazine and a library, and written voluminous critical articles on experimental practice. Moreover, the revelation of the imminent deterioration of his own body has placed the artist squarely at the literal outer limits of existence, a place whose interest to him is therefore no longer theoretical or academic: it's his home.

Which is why, if Mike Hoolboom seems to be demonstrating an interest in moving toward the mainstream, the move applies to the art but not the artist himself. While the form the work takes may embrace conventional elements, the issues it raises are anything but. Since

he's learned of his medical condition, Hoolboom's work has expanded from the discourse of body, language and cinema to a scathingly satirical examination of the institutions of state, culture and nationhood. For, as *Escape in Canada*, *Kanada*, *Valentine's Day* and the forthcoming *House of Pain* make clear, the artist's own mortality has been consistently affected by the external machinery of social organization.

Thus the language of state and nationhood is analogous to the discourse of body and self. Perhaps this is why Hoolboom's Canada is a place stricken with disease, denial, bad blood and rampant ignorance of its own history: it's the larger body we all share, and its limitations also mark the periphery of our own sense of who we are or imagine becoming. Like the cinema and memory itself, it's a machine. The problem is that, as with the other machines he's dismantled, Mike Hoolboom has already learned this one doesn't work. How it's supposed to work is no mystery: that's what politicians and the mainstream media are for. They draw attention away from the machine's malfunction: a little tinkering here and there, and a smoothly operating yet fundamentally unchanged system will be up and running again. To see how truly screwed up things are takes someone who's had a chance to watch the machine for a good long time. From a distance, and from the outside.

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