

the willing voyeur...

By Richard Kerr

For nearly two decades, Richard Kerr's studies of figures in landscapes have been part of the canon of fringe film work in Canada. *Canal* (1981), his imagistic study of the Welland locks, is perhaps Kerr's masterpiece. In it, he combines a love for Ontario's land and mechanistic past with an autobiographical approach. Since that time, Kerr has become increasingly interested in narrative cinema. In the 1990s, Kerr began work on a feature film. Originally entitled *Gun Control*, and scripted by Alan Zweig, the film has been transformed by Kerr into *the willing voyeur...* Like his earlier incursions into drama, this film reflects Kerr's sensibilities: his painterly fascination with interiors and exteriors is ever-present as is his profound unease with the narrative form. A self-described "documentary-essayist" with avant garde roots, Kerr is surely a candidate for the title (first applied to him by fellow filmmaker Mike Hoolboom) of the "quintessential Canadian filmmaker."

— Marc Glassman



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hat kind of film would an experimental director produce given the machinery and money of the mainstream? The following tale is an anecdotal recreation of the making of *the willing voyeur...*, the first feature by a die-hard experimentalist. Though, in truth, it is two stories: one written and the other to be found between the lines. The unwritten story is one that most Canadian feature filmmakers could write. It is a tale of woe, dealing with Agencies. Tales of woe are only that and, like gossip, a waste of valuable time. Therefore, I will be light on the woe and reflect on the experiences of a Quintessential Canadian Filmmaker as he moves from the marginality of experimental work to the terrors of feature filmmaking while struggling to remain true to the cinema he understands.

Like a 180-degree tracking shot, I will move from the point of view of the first person to that of the second. Subjective distance should improve this story.

This movie is about alienation. It's a Canadian theme. You have the train, the body bags, the kids in the train station running for their lives. You have people committing suicide. There are no bright futures in this movie. It ends up in a dark room in the basement of a train station with people putting bullets in their heads. You know what they say about that: "the bullets go in; the lights go out." With this movie, I explore those corners of your psyche where no light is allowed. It's about the darkness of our times. I think the bigger question is: what do you think the movie is about?

—The Director.

You remind yourself about leaving film school in 1978. You remember travelling to the Dundas School of Art to see Michael Snow live! He was screening *Rameau's Nephew*. It did not make a lick of sense at the time, but Snow was funny and made a lasting impression. You would like to have a job like his, so you make a career choice to be an experimental filmmaker.

Flash Forward. You're in a car travelling through Holland with Snow in the back seat, being interviewed for Dutch radio. You have the privilege of listening to Snow talk about cinema. Your memory reduces Snow's conversation to a simple concept: that cinema is about shaping time. His simplification was a testimony that you didn't need to know too much too soon in life, to survive on the margins of Canadian cinema.

Flash Back through your past.

There is an upside to your self-fulfilled ambition to be Marginal. You are raised in a System that encourages you to map out a program and do your work daily. If enough of your peers believe in the value of your work, you are allowed to continue. Your program, which will be underwritten for the next 15 years, is about self-cultivation. You are a *plein air* filmmaker. You like to move about the landscape, light metre and camera in hand. You work from a feeling and not much of a plan, and certainly never with a script. You work like this from 1976 until 1990, never questioning the value of your practice, nor your view from the margins. After a dozen movies, you get your movie-making act down. You need time and light more than money and you realize that experience brings clarity, and clarity, in turn, removes doubt. What a good System we have in place for a Marginal Filmmaker.

In 1989, after a screening in Seattle where your work pulls in three customers and a very brief discussion, you retreat to your hotel room to contemplate your marginality. It is in that Seattle hotel room that you come to the realization that our System will not last; or more accurately, you will not last in the System. For the first time in your career as a Marginal Man, you want to position yourself, to make one last movie before the System collapses.

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An epiphany seldom comes without cost. This last movie is, of course, a bigger movie, though true to your previous themes of self-cultivation and experimentation. Your cinematic epiphany gets expensive with 35mm equipment, a writer, actors, unions and shooting in America with your fading Canadian dollar. All this new movie stuff comes not from ambition, but from a restless muse. In the past, when inflicted with such a malady, you would light up your Brakhage prints, perhaps *Dante's Quartet*, and silently be reminded what cinema should be. But on this occasion you are convinced by others, but really by yourself, that your new movie should be as big as you can possibly make it. Your nerves shake from within at the thought of entering a world where you will be preoccupied with trying to turn light into money. You know you are entering the vulgar world of film manufacturing: product over process. The only questions are: how much will the System give you and how much of yourself will you lose, perhaps forever? Making your new movie is going to pit you against Them, whoever They may be.

There are a number of parallel stories. I think that those parallel stories will keep your interest; they do tie together in some way. There is more than one element in the script that would constitute a mystery, but I don't care if you figure my puzzles out. If someone said, 'This is a post-modern mystery,' I'd say fine, but I don't know really what post-modern means. Existential, yes. Existential Road Movie I can see....

—The Writer.

Your new attitude is set and it's time to get crazy. Nothing could be better than making your new movie in America across the street from the White House. How are you going to get the System to pay for this one? You move with reckless zeal to close any deal you can.

Opposite page: Kaya McGregor and Hadley Obodiac
This page: Eden Philps holds a child protectively.

"If you are not Hollywood, the feeling is that you must be up to no good, which is not entirely wrong."

—Richard Kerr

You don't know it yet, but you're going to deal yourself into a treacherous 13-day shoot schedule, with locations from Washington, D.C. to Saskatchewan. In fact, you don't know a ton of things about the mechanics of producing a feature. The worst of it is, the Agency, with its Kafkaesque character, insists you sign on as the Producer. Producing is a verb; that's the easy part. But, in our System, a Producer is really an Administrator. As a Producer, your search for funding will take you places where there's money for your movie, but this search comes with serious conditions. As a Marginal Man, you have never worked with conditions other than the self-imposed ones. As you begin your fund raising, you get short-term lucky. There is euphoria in the land. The lobbyists are at work. There are development funds for all ideas, even the unworkable. No broadcaster or distributor is needed. Just fill out the forms and behave like a Producer. The cheque is in the mail. A local joke told at the time: "How does a Saskatchewan Producer double his income?" "He puts out a second mailbox."

Naturally, you get in line for yours. The Agency makes shrewd public proclamations in support of a Writer/Director-driven industry. Everyone is on-side. Heads are spinning with notions of Antonioni/Godard-like innovation. This will be The Cinema We Need. Being a true Marginal Man, you have your own take on this euphoria. You understand that the view from the margins allows you to be both optimistic and

cynical in the same breath. All misgivings aside, the Agency will be the ticket to underwrite your new, bigger movie. You sign up for the program and enter the world of development hell for a thousand days.

Flash Forward three years: You get short-term lucky again. There is a yearly production drought in Saskatchewan. You are in the right place at the right time and you have a substantial Canada Council grant that will protect you. The Council insists that you retain 100 per cent creative control. For the first and only time the Agency calls you. They want to do business and do it now. Your new, bigger movie is given the green light. You're off to Toronto for casting and script meetings.

Then the real work begins. The collaboration with your writer intensifies and ends abruptly. You suspect that you have burned each other out over the three years of development. You are 10 days from the first day of principal photography in Washington, D.C. A sequence of events unfolds that keeps you busy at the wrong things. Your lead actor bails out. She has shaved her head and started faxing you mock posters for the movie. She is stranded in South Beach, Miami, working with a metal band which she says would be great in *our* movie. A call to her Agent turns into a call to her shrink, who confirms that she is a little too crazy to hold down an acting job. You're getting a bit lightheaded yourself. You try to talk the Agent into letting her work despite this spell of craziness. Craziness can be good; you're sure it won't get in the way. In the end, it's no go. You have to start auditioning again. You're all over the map and not minding it a bit; even the bellhop has casting suggestions.

The audience knows what you don't know. That's what makes it interesting.

—The Director to his actors during auditions.

You're on your way to Washington, permits in hand. All you have to do is get cast and crew and gear through Customs. In your career as a Marginal Man, you developed a skill for crossing the border and shooting in America. Your instincts tell you it's not a good idea in these days of Free Trade to be crossing the border with a film called (working title) *Gun Control*. That would take too much explaining. You know that the golden rule is to avoid explaining anything to a Customs official. Plan B has you travelling under dossiers of deceit that indicate you're part of a Regina cable crew off to Washington to shoot an educational

documentary about public sculpture in America. The Customs officials buy it. The actors travel as tourists.

As you arrive at Dulles Airport, you are reminded of one of the deals you were so quick to make with the Agency: in order to up your budget, you agreed to make your movie a training vehicle for the fledgling industry. Training money is bad money. In the end, it prohibits you from moving in stealth-like ways which are crucial when shooting in the streets of America. You are reminded that one of the production office trainees was charged with booking the hotels in downtown D.C. The trainee mistakenly booked

hotel rooms in Maryland, one state away. Fortunately, your A.D. is street-wise. He does the hustle and comes up with a full complement of rooms at the Hotel Washington, a block from the White House, and the hotel manager even throws in the President's Suite. Roosevelt to Nixon slept there, and you sleep there and can use it for the movie's set. You're impressed with how fast things change.

The next day you meet with the cast and crew in the President's Suite for a debriefing. The

actors are letting the fancy hotel suites mislead them into thinking that this is a major motion picture. Calls must be made to their Agents. You are as ready as ever to start shooting, except that the film stock has been rerouted to Memphis. No fear. You're in the picture business now. You call for Action. You call for video and start shooting on Hi-8. Better to be shooting on video than to languish in the President's Suite.

The film stock arrives the next day. You haven't even started into the schedule and you're on to Plan B. You rationalize this as good; when there is chaos, the cast and crew look to you. Chaos and being a Marginal Man somehow go hand in hand. Your Line Producer is over in Virginia trying to buy a .45 as a prop. His story sounds much more interesting than the one in the script. The .45 brings energy to the set. The crew take turns messing with it; the actors look particularly impressive handling it.

The shooting begins (the movie that is). Washington is a touchy place to shoot (a movie, that is), even with permits in hand. With as much filming as you have done in America, Washington is the toughest. The trick is having the permits (which we did), but you should also hire a cop to cut through the layers of Park Rangers and monument guardians. You will have to work fast and very early in the day.



Hadley Obodiac with director Richard Kerr during shooting of *the willing voyeur*....

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The actual process of our characters' development was more affected by spontaneity, the elements, the trip, Washington, and the surveillance crews around us at all times in D.C. That affected us a lot more than sitting down and rehearsing, because a lot of what you rehearse in a room doesn't fly on the street.

—**The Actor.**

You're in a state of exhausted clarity

, but something concerns you, it always has. This may be your movie, but for the first time you are not the cinematographer. This is your first time working with a D.O.P. and you get lucky because you have hired Gerald Packer (*H, The Darling Family*). Gerald is built for the heavy slugging in the streets. He, like you, can work fast and reckless and get it right. Gerald's confidence makes you fearless and that's all a Director can ask for from their D.O.P. You have been rewarded with a small, crack crew which thrives on the street and works with collective spontaneity.

If you want to be in the movie, be around the camera.

—**Director to his cast and crew.**

The shooting is physical, with the heat, humidity, and the pressure of staying one step ahead of the permit police. After four days of running around Washington, you start to feel the city looking back at you. The hotel manager takes a closer look at what you are doing in the President's Suite. Your set is a block from the White House and when the President comes and goes, the rooftops fill with SWAT patrols. You're mindful to put down the camera and the .45 away while the President gets out of harm's way. The SWAT patrol knows what you're up to. By the last day of shooting you're stopped everywhere. Washington is a paranoia-inducing city. As small as your crew is, you are noticed and watched. Washington, unlike most cities, does not want your movie business. If you are not Hollywood, the feeling is that you must be up to no good, which is not entirely wrong.

You have worked the cast and crew hard. You feel a corner has been turned in your first four days of shooting. In consultation with the A.D. and Continuity Person, you realize that you did not nail the key scenes at the Vietnam Veterans'

Memorial—the Wall. The good news is, you all got crazy and shot a series of improvs; you got coverage, but not in the conventional sense. The Producer in you feels good for the first time in months. As you wrap in D.C., you're reminded of why you like to shoot in America. America is pre-lit for movie making. Washington, with all its monuments and klieg lighting, is spectacular for street shooting. Las Vegas is certainly pre-lit with a mix of neon and desert light. New York is lit with deep architectural shadows and ready to go. America also comes with a willing cast of secondary players and walk-ons. You soon forget about your peso-like dollar. Everyone in America knows what a movie crew is. You are just one more. Americans will always cut you slack if you're polite, pay up front and tip. They like to see your money move from you to them.

With Washington done, you board an Amtrak train that takes you through Chicago and on to Montana. Five days in and you don't even think of calling the production office, let alone your family. The downside of shooting on the road is that you can develop nasty habits, like psychologically dropping off the face of the earth. On the Amtrak you enter into another world of guerrilla movie making. Again you pay up front, tip and work fast and loose, the script forgotten. You're in a zone now and you realize when it comes to real movie making, whether it's an experimental film or a feature, it's all about focus. It's all about shaping time in the most interesting way with the moment at hand. You finally understand that being a Marginal Man is a state of mind, not a fixed position. All Canadian cinema is marginal and somehow that puts you at ease.

Some lessons are learned.

You have learned not to take the actions of the Agency personally. After all you got to make your movie. Working with the Agency galvanized your resolve towards Independence. As a practitioner, you are in for the long haul and this is only one movie out of many more to come. Don't scratch the scabs of your conscience; don't get addicted to remorse. The good news comes amid the bad. Be grateful you have lived to make movies. With your hands steady on the plough, you continue. ■



Lincoln Memorial

Washington D.C. 1992