

A Conversation With Humphrey Esterhase
by Maximilian Le Cain

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Over forty years ago, Humphrey Esterhase's entire filmography of seven underground movies was destroyed while he was travelling in South America. His luggage, containing the only copies of these works, was thrown overboard during a mutiny on a boat he had booked passage on. The incident ended with a number of the mutineers being summarily executed with extreme brutality by thugs hired by the boat's owner. This butchery took place in full view of the passengers, including Esterhase.

Possibly in consequence of this harrowing event, the reclusive Esterhase has not made a film since. Close Watch is delighted to announce that it will be producing the series of new films that he has announced as marking his return to cinema. The first of these is a collaboration between Esterhase and me entitled Ten Minutes Isn't Worth a Dream, currently in production. I recently recorded the following conversation with him as a sort of introduction to this long forgotten figure's thinking on cinema.

MLC: So you were born in Ireland, then?

HE: Of course...

MLC: Really?

HE: In August, 2010!

MLC: Come on!

HE: You come on! Bollocks!

MLC: Will you at least tell me if it's true that Pierre Clementi acted in one of your first films?

HE: Why? It's not important. They don't exist.

MLC: Nevertheless, there was a moment...

HE: This is all bullshit! You can see Clementi in many films, in many good films even. And each shot of Clementi, of whoever, they're only a few seconds in that person's life. Then watching them and rewatching them...

MLC: The instant repeated?

HE: How can you say something so stupid? No! The cinematic image is a germ, a seed, ultimately nothing to do with that instant of filming. In fact, it abandons the poor imbeciles who create it as soon as they've done it, like so many exhausted whores at dawn. What the cinematic image does- say Clementi when you see him in Pasolini or Buñuel or what have you- it spreads into the present by suggesting what surrounded it at the instant of inception. It engenders a submerged universe. That's its power. That's what interests me and that's how it carries into the future. That's its redemptive quality. Not gossip masquerading as film history... Clementi, by his presence alone, could create a universe that could sustain it and therefore was beautiful. But he got sick and died young. The world couldn't sustain Clementi, anymore than anyone else. Just cinema...

MLC: So what is your relationship with your drowned cinema?

HE: It doesn't exist. A cinema that is physically unable to touch and pollinate the present moment has no existence, past or present. The work we're doing now is my first filmmaking. It's not even a broken trajectory, it's a question of what is and what isn't and I don't want to talk about it any more.

MLC: Harry Smith said that all the money being spent on film preservation should be spent on researching the creation of a time machine.

HE: That has nothing to do with cinema. Even if cinema is the most effective way of combatting the present.

MLC: What present?

HE: Mine. I no longer have the energy to think in terms of taking on the general present.

MLC: Are we talking about watching films or making them?

HE: Both. Watching some films, good ones...

MLC: What films do you like?

HE: Oh, hard to remember them all... I don't know. Oliveira, Jean-Claude Rousseau, Arrieta...

MLC: Garrel?

HE: Garrel, yes. His '70s films...

MLC: You spoke of the redemptive quality of cinema?

HE: Yes, of course...

MLC: Is that related to Godard's thinking on that subject?

HE: He always gets the best lines. Maybe that's why I don't go in for much talking in my stuff. (Laughs) I've no idea. And, by the way, your obsession with contextualisation is disturbing, a real mania.

MLC: Redemption through cinema?

HE: Maybe this is the subject which can let us talk about why now I'm returning to making films after all this time. I'll tell you this: even if I stopped making films, I never stopped being a filmmaker, thinking as one. But I had to put cinema to the test of life. I needed to prove it against everything. And this took forty years- to prove that cinema is irreplaceable. To make sure that it would not let itself be effaced in my life. To combat it with travel, love, bodily sensation, indifference, banality, ideology, even religion very briefly... And reality has time and again emptied itself of me. Life is an accumulation of disorientation. And now I'm old and very tired and my filmmaking has remained the only steady compass, something I've always suspected but which I needed time itself to prove for me. And I always knew that I couldn't make anything until I'd put cinema to this test. But now it's time...

MLC: What makes cinema so irreplaceable?

HE: Do you look at the world directly?

MLC: Sometimes. Not often. Selectively, in fragments. Just enough. But in full knowledge of what I don't look at... A sort of wincing relationship. But when I look, I really look... Too much even.

HE: Hmm. Your films are nihilistic, they flee the world, embracing a frightened, falsely objectified interiority...

MLC: They're instinctual. Make of them what you will.

HE: Fear! That's what I see... You lost the world. Of course, many young people have, but I think with you it's different, more conscious. Of course, with time, we all lose it in one way or another. But you've lost the image of the world. And that's what I need to find. That's what my work consists of. Not to represent the world but to recreate from its details some sort of harmony, some sort of power... Which is the same as saying: to find cinema... Something fragile that can only exist in this way.

MLC: For instance?

HE: It's what I said earlier about the germ-like quality of the film image, blossoming at once in time through montage but also into another dimension through the offscreen world it suggests. Imagine entering a city by train at night, maybe one you know well or maybe not. It's nothing but rows of lights in the darkness. Seen in a certain state of mind, it's an image of infinite, unspecific potential, reaching more inwards, into the feelings which the limited tool-kit of reality can't quite engage... An exterior view suddenly embodies something so private, so deep inside that you can't even find or articulate it within yourself. Cinema can do this, too. Rarely, but sometimes. Sometimes when Rousseau films a window, say, or when Garrel films a face... Open moments when we open our eyes, when we've stopped speaking, stopped thinking. For the audience, film is a continual first glimpse. We should be more conscious of this incomparable quality of the medium. That's all I want to do: to present the spectator with a first look at the world. Cinema must be a perpetual rebirth through the eyes, lucid about its own fragility... That's all that interests me now. That's what remains. The world itself is, of course, already lost, along with my capacity or desire to form an objective view of it. Keeping up with reality demands an effort which requires an amount of energy that would only lay waste to a person if they attained it. We live in the epoch of self-immolation, the very minimum reality demands of us. Of course, other eras had their own ways of devouring their offspring...