

## **Orchestrating Armada: John Gillies interviewed by Nicholas Zurbrugg**

*Nicholas Zurbrugg* To begin with, why did you call this installation Armada?

John Gillies I was trying to make these images of the First Fleet seem strange and menacing. If one calls the First Fleet the 'First Armada' it has totally different connotations for white Australians. It's a cultural thing. If your first language is Spanish then there's something quite neutral about this term, whereas if you grow up in the context of English history it's not neutral. I was trying to take that image and make it something that one sees for the first time—something really menacing as the image of the boat must have been for the people who first saw it coming here—almost like a UFO coming from another planet. Something quite awe-inspiring that we know through history brought terrible consequences- momentous consequences.

*Is this a new thematics compared with your earlier work Techno/Dumb/Show?*

It's different. Like *Techno/Dumb/Show* it's concerned with the body, but in *Armada* the body is absent. It's trying to suggest the presence of people without actually showing them. I had planned to use cut-away shots of people's faces turning around to look at something - we don't know what - but I cut that out. I tried to conjure up their presence without actually showing them, by using the sound of people or the things they inscribe, like walls which are made by people and carved out of people's marks, cloth that's worn by people, and video-tape which is woven - again, like memory—and books and writing. So there's an implicit human presence. Yes - all kinds of human presence. It's not explicit.

*At the beginning of the piece there's a shot of a kind of terrain in which I seemed to see the outline of a skull. Was that coincidental?*

Yes. But if those images are working they're like ink-blots - they're so esoteric and cryptic that they're throwing up their own possibilities and conjuring up all sorts of imagery.

*Were you consciously trying to use rather evocative fragments? Did you find it difficult, for example, to decide to use a particular section of wall?*

Yes—I've got miles of it. I've used three, four or five different pieces throughout the sequence.

*What was your principle for selecting such imagery? Were you working intuitively?*

Yes—they were selected fairly intuitively in terms of the ways they would combine with other sections. Although there were a couple of sections at the beginning that are quite recognisable even if a bit fuzzy—they're particular walls in Barcelona.

*So you're looking at the resonance of objects and materials, as opposed to the kind of close-ups of individual people used in Techno/Dumb/Show?*

Yes, that's what I'm trying to do. I was also using the sound of short-wave radio signals to try to evoke a space where human voices exist.

*There also seems to be sequences of something a bit like electronic interference — were these radio signals too?*

In those sections I was trying as it were to grind into the image to find something - to suggest sound grinding through the videotape - rather like grinding into a wall or something like that. That's the reason for that image of the video scraping backwards and forwards, then breaking apart.

*What was the function of the images of pages from the Bible? Were these evoking textual signals and the printed voice?*

Yes, but it's not in English. I didn't specifically want people to read it, which is why these images are moving so fast. It's also another form of mark that human beings have made - the ships brought books and they have a certain kind of power- they're memory systems.

*So the whole installation is about time, inscription, power and memory?*

Yes. The screen upon which the piece is projected in the installation is actually made of sail-cloth, so that it's projected upon a sail - although that's not totally obvious - which is another kind of wall.

*To some extent Armada makes me think a bit of Michael Snow's Wavelength in the sense that Wavelength also combines the experience of looking at a nautical image and looking at a wall although obviously using colour.*

I think *Wavelength* is really amazing - for me it's one of the key filmic works. Spielberg has even said that as well!

*Although you're obviously doing something very different in terms of the evocative quality of the piece's various inscriptions and perhaps in terms of the austerity of the images of ships which almost seem to tough but never quite do so. Did you begin by making the installation's image-track or its soundtrack, or did you produce both at the same time?*

The images were done first, and then we constructed the soundtrack last Saturday using the Queensland Conservatorium's studio.

*Are you happy with the soundtrack?*

I'd like to re-work it. You really need to hear it back in a big space like the Queensland College of Art Gallery to hear what the outer limits are. I'd like to go back and re-mix it slightly and add some things to it.

*Armada's rapid sequence of images and sounds seem to have something of the percussive visual and sonic quality of Anthony Batch, William Burroughs and Brion Gysin's Towers Open Fire and The Cut Ups.*

Yes. The work that I do - like that of a lot of people, perhaps - is post-cut-up in a sense.

*How do you feel your work differs from these early cut-up films?*

It's more eclectic in its language, and I'm not afraid of using quite conventional shot structures sometimes. In *Techno/Dumb/Show* there are a couple of scenes that are constructed like classic narrative cinema. I use any device that's appropriate. Whereas in the cut-up work I think they were trying to develop a new kind of language that was very, very specific. And they did so.

*The railway sequence in Armada seems to typify your use of what one might think of as samplings of 'older' cinematic language. How were these sequences put together and how did you envisage their function?*

It's not old footage, it just looks like old footage - it's just the way I've shot it. The sound of the train there was actually mixed with a contemporary train as well because I didn't want to push it all into the past. It was above all a reference to the industrial revolution, clocks and the regimentation of time. On one level, the reason Europeans came to Australia was because of the industrial revolution - because of all the changes that it brought about. And the method by which the English State was able to colonise the world was through clocks - they were able to measure time by Greenwich Meantime anywhere in the world. The dominance of time was their basic technology.

*In a way, the train sequence reminded me a bit of an old Ealing Studios comedy - The Ladykillers - in which a gang of incompetent crooks end up killing on another. Every time a train is heard to go by their house it signifies that another body is about to be dropped over a bridge, onto passing trucks.*

That's interesting, because in *Armada* each time the train sequence happens, a murder has in fact taken place. Both industrialization and colonization imply a murder—literally.

*So the image of the Union Jack spinning round represents the colonial machine?*

And the industrial revolution machine. The Union Jack turns into an infernal machine—the kind of thing Blake might have written about. The dominance of time seemed to me to be a particularly Protestant thing. I spent half a day in a Brisbane

clock shop shooting the image of a clock that turns into this kind of machine, and it turned out that all the people who worked there were evangelical Christians sending missionaries to Fiji - which confirmed my theories about that whole technology and also the way in which, in places like Australia, old people have this obsession with keeping all their clocks running on time. It's the thing that holds their subjectivity in place and stops them from cracking up.

*Is Armada in any way an autobiographical piece?*

Well most pieces are, but it's not that important - if they're only autobiographical, then I don't think they're very interesting. You work from your own experience, but if the audience thinks that you're only working out something that's your own, they get bored very very quickly.

*So in a sense you prefer to offer the audience something more general to chew on?*

Yes—that's what I'm trying to do here. In other words you're bringing together certain rather mythological or timeless images and evocations, and certain quite specific kinds of references?

Yes—it is about something quite specific—the forces of colonisation, and the transition of one culture over another, one cultural form over another—although in a sense the people are all absent in it.

*Why are they absent, would you say?*

I guess because the audience are the people that are in it.

*So you're really confronting the audience in the centre which impinge upon them and which impinged upon previous generations?*

Yes—it places the audience in the centre, rather than representing people on the screen. But that's a tricky strategy, and it's too soon to know yet whether *Armada* really succeeds.

First published in Eycline, number 25, Spring 1994, Brisbane pp.13-15  
Nicholas Zurbrugg obituary: <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/oct/26/guardianobituaries.books>