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- Charles Gilhooly, January, 1993

Interview with Chuck Gilhooly by Gerald Saul, January, 1993

Some of the colour's not quite right, it changed. It sounded better when I mixed it. It lost a bit of the music in the background, but not much. The percussion, that's all there was.

I don't know, it's about trains. I had it in me, Gerald, I don't know, now that I think of it all, I know I did it. I did it, I got it done. Actually, it started with this documentary I was going to do with stills from old railways.

My dad worked for the trains for 34.5 years.

The language of the trains, and the words that were on it. They're whipping by and you can hear this talking but it's whizzing by pretty quick too. There's so much language there and there's the trains communicating with their whistles. What do you think about language.

Yeah, that was a constant thing, because there are so many trains you know, and they all communicate with each other. That radio is going, you know. Because there's one track and there can possibly be a train coming from the other direction. And I wanted to see kind of the mystery of what they say in the train, you know, what do they talk about, cause really they talk about some pretty bizarre things. They talk about what ever, you know, they're working when they're sitting up there. It's like you and me when we're working we're talking about maybe what we did yesterday.

Are you happy with it?

Yeah, I'm fairly pleased with it, for a first answer print it's fine. The corrections are pretty minimal. Only the music but everyone else I've questioned, they notice the percussion and for me I wanted

the percussion a wee bit louder but then it might have become overpowering so I think it worked out for the best. Otherwise the voices I wanted them that way to mystify and to work with the visuals cause as the visuals begin to speed up, there are more sounds. And the more things get chaotic, even within the soundtrack and the visuals.

What is the ending all about? What are you saying?

I don't know, didn't you figure it out? I'll tell you but you can't write it down. It's for everyone to figure out for themselves their own way. I have my own interpretation of it and if I spill it out, people will then see it.

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The engines crashed, it was in town here. They're hard to get to, they won't let you on to the set of a train wreck. My dad took me there. He knew the guy in charge, the yard master. He was talking to him and I'm walking around shooting film. It was quite convenient.

So the film would have been impossible without your dad's help.

Not all the train stuff. There was no way I could have got on the train. It would have really hard. It would have been like working on the railroad. Forget it.

So would that be your second choice of a vocation?

No. No. I did work on the railroad for a summer employment job one day when I got out of high school.

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I wanted to ask you about your dad. I was watching what-a-ya-call it... the gun film...

"Bitter Sweet"

I watched that again today, to remember it...

That was a distinct period in my life, wasn't it?

Yeah, but there's thing about family loyalty in it right? Like how could you do that to your own kin, like the worst crime is a crime against your kin. But then this film, that's a connection I see. This film, it's about trains but it's also about your dad.

Yeah, it's about my dad, in a sense; in an abstract sense. He spent his life working on the railroad.

What do think about that?

It's what he did. He's actually...All people his age, their just gone. Someone who gets a job when their 24 or 25 and just stays there until retirement, doesn't happen anymore. Very rarely. So those people are gone. You know, that used to be the thing, you'd go and get a job and you pay into the package and you retire. And they give you a gold watch at the end. My dad said something funny cause they did, they gave him a clock, you know, this cool clock, and he says "What the fuck do I need to know the time for now? I don't have to go to work." You know, what the fuck is it's purpose? Yup.

What does he think of you making the film? What did he say when you said "dad, can I follow you around, get on the train..."

He said he'll see. He got me on. He wanted to take me on this one trip that he went on, but it never transpired.

What does he think of you making films?

At least you enjoy what you're doing. So there is that point of it. I do enjoy what I'm doing, I don't enjoy being broke, Gerald. Do any of us? Um, yeah, he doesn't say too much, you know. It was nice that he took me on the trains, you know, because it was theoretically against the law, what he did.

But he knew his time was up, so what was he going to do, fire him? He was going to retire in, you know, about a month. He retired a month and a half or two months after I shot that stuff on the train.

What else was I thinking about? Oh, I was thinking about your favourite professor, Chris Gallagher. He's got this train in the beginning of his feature, of Undivided Attention. I think it's more of a sexual image for him. Is there any relation to that? I didn't get the sense of it but...?

You know, I understand what you're talking about because the train is this giant male phallic symbol. It symbolizes men, is what it does. That's all it does.

Did you think about that when you were shooting?

I didn't consciously think of it when I was shooting, but when I was editing, the thought occurred to me. This is like a big fucking phallic symbol.

You don't think about the conductor out there just like he was some guy on his Harley?

Oh they are. The conductor is like a god. They're like gods. But that was more a realization in the editing. You know? and in the studying of trains and the history and it took a while to build up to that blunt observation. So the train is theoretically an obstruction on the land.

So you're fucking the land?

Yeah. It's an obtrusion on it. Something not part of it. The land's taking back over as the people are all here and there's other means of transportation.

What's the future of the trains then?

The future is they'll be a novelty item. You know what I mean? They'll still be used for some things.

We'll still see them. It will evolve. Right now, I see it losing pace with the times, our present day idea of the railroad.

There's the more futuristic types of railroad, like in Japan. Slick things that move 200 mph.

But that's not any good for moving goods.

But trains are only used here for moving good. They're not used for moving people.

But the tracks evolved. The first tracks they had were a narrower track. Now they have a wider track to go on. The space between the wheels is wider. They rebuilt the whole line, everywhere. The first tracks were a narrower track. It's kind of interesting that the track itself, on different widths and different sizes, so you can only go so fast on certain track. It's kind of an interesting thing. I was somewhere, I was with my niece at agribition one year. CN or CP display, one of the two, had all different tracks in a big thing. I got a whole bunch of information on lines, stuff, railroad maps. And then I sent away for one, from one of the two. They sent me the information.

So you worked on the rails, out of high school?

If you wanna call it that, yeah.

For how long?

A couple months, summer. I don't think that's worthwhile noting. (laughs)

Why?

I was a car checker, I worked midnights. I just wrote the numbers down on the cars. There'd be the yard and everything, and they'd have to know where all the cars are and what's there.

It doesn't sound glamorous.

Pretty boring job. Pretty minimal. Sometimes it was a little scary, because it's pitch black. There's no light, just your light. And you're walking between tracks. I guess working there did give me ideas for a lot of my yard stuff. That's where I got the idea, from just walking in the tracks.

Yeah, you'd have to be there to imagine it. I've never thought of shooting trains. Trains to me are things that are beside the highway when you're driving your car, or maybe blocking a lane of traffic. But I don't visualize being between the rails and stuff.

I got to ride in the engine when I was a kid. The old boy, you know?

You still never dreamed of doing that when you grew up... become an engineer? Blow the whistle

No, I blew the whistle when I was a kid.

Got that out of your system.

When you're a little kid, you hear an engineer 'wanna toot the horn?' -- Oh, Sure, Great! In this big metal thing, right? Towering over everything. It's really a male orientated train. It's heavy and it's major power. Everything is to the max in them. They're loud, they're intrusive, and sometimes slow moving.

So how has your feeling of the trains changed over the making of the film? Before you made it? after you made it? Do you have more respect? Less respect?

I think my respect's the same, it stays the same.

You're not impressionable anymore?

Oh, every so often I see one and I think "Oh, I'd like to shoot that one". The shooting is never complete.

I still grab a camera whenever I see a bee.

Oh yeah, you get that in you, definitely. It seems, by the time I was finished shooting, I got the hang of shooting the trains, and it's done.

I've heard it said that your last 20% of what you shoot is your best stuff, that you've finally hit your pace. Did you have that feeling or did you have good footage all the way through?

I had some good footage all the way through. I did stills first, of certain things.

Your process, you shot stills first?

I shot stills of different aspects, and different things, then I went and shot film.

So you shot a lot of stills?

Oh, probably have a couple hundred stills.

Put on a show sometime. Even just in small format, put them in little frames, or put a few per frame, do up a show for it.

Yeah, I have whacks of stills. Some don't turn out, some are interesting. Some are dealing with motion, some are just of a caboose or and engine or winter...

So that approach worked for you?

That approach for this film worked really well for me. I'm glad I went and shot the stills, cause it cost you less money and you have time to think about things and when you refer back to the still and think "oh yeah". Cause film is just a series of still images.

I was doing a bit of that on Dread.

Yeah I know, cause you had those supers. It's kind of nice to think, well, this type of a shot may work, this one, uhhh? Like, why go and shoot the still and waste the footage on it. If it's not pleasing as one image, is it going to be pleasing as a hundred images?

What's your next film?

I'm doing the little piece of animation with cut-outs from all the advertisements that come to your house. It's just something different, I've never really done any animation, except in the workshop and this came to me a while ago and I thought, well I'm going to finish this train piece first and then I'll start on this other one, and I need to finish Dream Sequence. DREAM SEQUENCE!!!!