

The LONG AND THE TALL OF IT

A review by Gerald Saul

Charles Gilhooly's Steel Motion

I first met Chuck eight years ago when he and I were both fledgling film students. No one who has ever met Chuck would ever argue that he makes an immediate impression. His manner could be described as anything from intimidating to downright frightening. Initially, I wrote him off as someone studying film to get a piece of the action; the decadent lifestyle, the gorgeous starlets and the gala parties. Such people usually become disillusioned after a few months, a few sleepless weeks (months) and a few thousand dollars of film school. I couldn't imagine that this Chuck person could have anything meaningful to express. In time, I would discover the contradiction which is Charles (Chuck) Gilhooly.

Before I address Chuck's new film, his first film since completing school in 1987, I would like to discuss some of his student work. Life at a Glance (1984), Chuck's first effort, was a terrifying film which carefully, silently demonstrated the process of buying, preparing and injecting heroine. A couple dreams later, the cycle begins again. The film was not a morality play, it does not warn against, nor condone, drugs. It was just a slice of reality. It was real.

Chuck's next film would set the stage for the last two years of his student career. Bitter Sweet (1985) was, what I claimed his first film was not, a morality play. However, the morals behind it are not what they preach in Hollywood (or even in church for that matter). They are street ethics, the laws that rule the people who recognise no laws. The film tells the story of a guy who stabs his own brother for some money and drugs, but fails to finish the job. The stabbed brother recovers and recruits a lynching party to treat the first brother to a game of Russian Roulette. A line like "If the fucker shoots himself he won't be in jail and he'll save the taxpayers' money." haunts me with its naivety and brutal realness. The heroes are the ones with loyalty to their family and friends. All others are the enemy. The execution was pulled off with no regrets, and why should there be any? It is a black and white world with no love for "Scumbags". The film concludes with "It turned out all right, he's dead and he won't be fucking anyone else around". The events are not real, but the sentiment is. Chuck writes about the people he knows and the thoughts and feelings they have, he writes about loyalty and kinship. As campy and unrealistic as this film got, I never doubted the

honesty inherent in it.

Recently, Chuck showed me his new film, Steel Motion, which would seem at first to be a complete divergence from this previous work I described. The film is a rhythmic, meditative, non-narrative film about trains. It is layered with metaphor which must be intellectually or emotionally inferred by the spectator, rather than the slap in the face tendency found in his earlier work. This film continues Chuck's motif of the value and influence of family. Chuck's father, without whom this film would not, and could not have been made, worked on the trains for 34 1/2 years. Chuck told me, "It's about my dad...in an abstract sense." Chuck's father is now retired, as are many of his generation who found a lifetime career on the rails. The days of such career security are over, just as the days for the train are over.

When I watched the film, I was struck by the feeling that I was in a room where everyone was speaking another language. I could pick out a few words here or there, and I could recognise that they were communicating with each other (a distinct language was present) and perhaps I could even understand everything said if it was all slowed down enough. In the case of this film, the foreign language was in the form of flashes of text on the sides of cars, garbled voices over the radio, train whistles and (capital 'N') Noise. Faced with such a situation (regardless of what language) I see two options. The first would be to become as alert as possible, watch, listen and attempt to translate everything, so that the content of the conversation could become clear. The second choice is to lean back and enjoy the rhythm of the language. This latter option is how I chose to enjoy Steel Motion. The form of a finely crafted conversation can be a most pleasing experience. The whistle, so primal, a call into the emptiness of the prairies, blows. Images of train cars flashed by at blinding speeds, every one of them displayed portions of words or fragmented letters. At first, I felt the impulse to read it all, put it all in order, understand. Soon I realised that the trains and the conductors were not talking to me. They were using a language as old as the rails. The trains whizzed by, the prairies whizzed by, I watched and appreciated and felt no need to understand.

To me, the train has always been this slim streak of metal which rolls along parallel to the highway. It is only on those odd occasions when I find myself standing a few meters away from one am I awed by is incredible bulk. Chuck captured this in his film. The only thing which seems heavier and more immovable than the train is the prairie itself. However, by viewing one from the other, and by filming and optical printing with great patience, Chuck makes both of them move with the fluidity of smoke on a summer breeze. This leaves me with a sense that nothing is

permanent, nothing is unswayable with time.

When I asked Chuck about any possible sexual interpretations behind his train imagery, he told me,

"...the train is this giant male phallic symbol. It symbolizes men, is what it does... I didn't consciously think of it when I was shooting, but when I was editing, the thought occurred to me... The conductor is like a god... the train is theoretically an obstruction on the land."

Anyways, like Chuck, and like his previous films, Steel Motion has some rough edges but is straight forward and honest and offers many surprises. His vision of the world is always unique. I've been a fan for years, and look forward to seeing all his films in the future. After he finishes Dream Sequence (when is it going to be done Chuck? When? When? When?) Charles plans to try his hand at animation with a yet untitled commentary on wastage and consumerism.