

*James Leach*

### **Don Owen's Obliterated Environments**

I'm talking about Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head. It's that kind of space in which we find ourselves lost.<sup>1</sup>

The appearance of Don Owen's *Partners* in 1976 might have occasioned a re-evaluation of the work of a film-maker who virtually inaugurated the modern English-Canadian feature-film with *Nobody Waved Goodbye* (1963). Instead, like practically everything else that Owen has done since 1963, *Partners* was greeted only with scandal and indifference, with the additional stigma this time that the film's thriller form suggested that Owen had finally sold out to commercial interests.<sup>2</sup> Like all of Owen's films, *Partners* deals in contradictions and its reception exposed some of the most basic contradictions in English-Canadian culture. Too commercial to gain a critical reputation but not commercial enough to gain an audience, the film stresses the impossibility of separating sexual morality and sex roles from social and historical forces. Its lyrical and totally non-aggressive approach to love-making inevitably aroused the scissors of the Ontario censor who remains unmoved by the exploitive sado-masochism of much commercial film-making. Owen once again found himself the victim of the rigid patterns of thinking that his film challenges and once more his career came to a halt.

*Partners* is only Owen's fourth feature-film (if one counts the fifty-minute *Notes for a Film about Donna and Gail*) and his first since 1967. Yet, despite the frustrations and the disruptions in his career, Owen's cinema does reveal a remarkably consistent and developing vision. Not surprisingly, in the circumstances, this vision is one that grows out of the sense of being lost in one's own space that Margaret Atwood sees as a central part of the Canadian experience. The mainly

urban spaces that his characters try to inhabit are well-defined by Northrop Frye's concept of "an obliterated environment":

. . . in our world the sense of a specific environment as something that provides a circumference for an imagination has to contend with a global civilization of jet planes, international hotels, and disappearing landmarks—that is, an obliterated environment.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, "our world" here encompasses at least all over-developed capitalist societies, but the experience described has a particular resonance in Canada where landmarks have always been few and "international" influences strong. Owen's characters find themselves caught between the inertia engendered by the feeling of being lost in an indifferent environment and the narrowness of the stereotypes which their society has created as a substitute for identity.

The contradictions in the social processes that have created the obliterated environment are clearly illustrated in *High Steel*, a short documentary on Mohawk construction workers in New York made for the NFB in 1965. As a celebration of the courage of the Indians and their ability to work as a team along with precise modern machinery, this film seems to accept the NFB's concern to create an ideological synthesis of liberal humanism and technological progress. Yet Owen juxtaposes the work of the men above the indifferent urban crowds with images of the rural Québec community in which the Mohawks have their roots. Even this apparently simple contrast between rural past and urban present, however, dissolves into a series of contradictions. The Indian narrator wants the children to keep in touch with what it feels like to be an Indian, but he adds that Indians are "not that different from others" and the children are shown eating cornflakes. He says of his job that "if I didn't like it, I wouldn't do it", but immediately goes on to speak of the need to bring home the bacon.

This short film becomes an exploration of the repression of the social and economic processes that underlie the development of modern technological society. The traditions of the Indians have all but disappeared amidst a multitude of alien influences. A picturesque image of the village dominated by its church is obliterated by a large ship, suggesting that technological influences have superseded the old religious ones. Industrial and religious influences are brought together in the story of the collapse of the Québec bridge in 1907, after which the priest gave the last rites to the workers trapped in the wreckage and caught by the rising tide. The narrator's response to

this disaster is to assert that it was not the end of the Mohawk iron-workers and their powers of endurance are imaged in a shot of a woman pushing a baby carriage through a cemetery. Communal strength ensures survival but only through collaboration with the social forces that are destroying the values on which the community has been built. The way in which ideology suppresses contradiction is nowhere more apparent than in the film's use of a country-and-western song that tries to mythify the construction process by seeing it not in terms of social and economic factors but as a natural activity whose result is "mountains of iron and steel".

The song's apparent attempt to obliterate the complexity of the Indians' experience as presented in the images illustrates the way in which economic and human motives become so involved with each other in Owen's films that it is difficult to disentangle them. This confusion is one of the major concerns of *Nobody Waved Goodbye* in which Peter rebels against the materialism of his parents and tries to find a more human approach to life. Family life consists mainly of arguments about Peter's future, but his parents can see this future only in social and economic terms. His father describes him as "a bad investment" and his mother tells him not to become too involved with Julie because his energies should be devoted to gaining the education required to become a lawyer. Although Peter leaves home to escape from these materialistic pressures, he quickly finds that he cannot cope with the economic realities of urban society and his relationship with Julie suffers under the strain. Despite his contempt for his father's job as a car salesman, Peter is fascinated by cars and his two major acts of rebellion are car thefts. At the end of the film, he can see Julie's pregnancy and her plea for a "secure" human relationship only as another force pulling him back into the bourgeois family life he is so desperate to escape. He drives off alone in a stolen car into the void of the neon-lit urban expressway.

Like the Indians in *High Steel*, Peter cannot separate himself from the social values that dominate his environment, but, unlike them, he has no sense of communal heritage that might sustain him. Although he sings and plays guitar, Peter does not belong to one of those artistic communities which Owen explores in a number of his documentaries. These small communities provide a creative environment but rarely overcome the gulf between the artists and a public suspicious of the element of "performance" in the artistic temperament. Peter could not belong to such a group because he has so internalised the values of his society that he can find no positive way of expressing his

opposition to it. In his discussion with a Québécois of his own age, he stresses his need for an individual identity and his unwillingness to become part of a collective vision such as that developing in Québec. But it is Peter who is really unable to escape from his social context and he remains silent when challenged to state what his values are.

Peter's frustration and the bleak ending give *Nobody Waved Good-bye* a "downbeat" quality which many critics have seen as a hallmark of Canadian cinema. Yet Owen's approach also gives the film a playful detachment that has been effectively described by a French critic:

It is a sort of impressionism which arranges in time the facets of a phenomenon. The elements are juxtaposed in discontinuity . . . . Don Owen moves in a spiral around a whole world, around a reality, trying to disengage the meaning of it. It is a phenomenology which tries to describe the essence of adolescence.<sup>4</sup>

Owen's rapid shifts in perspective unsettle the spectator by setting up tensions within and between images and between what we see and what we hear. The baby carriage in the cemetery from *High Steel* is paralleled in the opening sequence of *Nobody Waved Goodbye* in which we first see Peter and Julie playing among tombstones. There is little sense here of continuity or endurance; rather this opening suggests the void that the adolescents see between childhood and death. The plaintive lyrics of Peter's song on the soundtrack lead into his fumbling verbal attempts to express his dissatisfaction with the death-in-life existence of his parents. He tells Julie that "we've been living in this kind of set-up for so long we've lost all perspective." Peter never does gain the detached perspective for which he is looking, but Owen constantly disrupts the surface of the film to prevent us from being pulled into the position from which Peter can only experience the situation as hopeless.

Owen's strategy is opposed to that of the cinema of illusion and spectacle which is referred to in Peter's attack on his prospective brother-in-law for going to see *Cleopatra*. His diatribe illustrates the way in which Owen sets up tensions in his film: we can sympathise with Peter because we can understand his disgust at the consumer society and its cinema but his self-assured contempt for his sister's inoffensive boyfriend seems excessive. But isn't this apparent self-assurance a mask for his basic insecurity? Caught between empathy and critical detachment, the spectator is prevented from becoming a passive consumer of the film but must grapple with strategies that

simultaneously parallel Peter's fragmented experience of his world and prevent a complete immersion in his vision.

The dislocations in the structure of *Nobody Waved Goodbye* and the "roughness" of its style have often been attributed to the documentary origins of the project and to budget limitations. Owen's second fiction film, *Notes for a Film about Donna and Gail* (1966), however, makes explicit his concern with the problem of finding a framework of values which would allow valid insights into human behaviour. The film's title points to its exploratory and tentative qualities, the story of Donna and Gail's friendship being presented to us as a series of fragments out of which the male narrator is trying to create meaning. He repeatedly expresses his frustration at not being able to get close to the two women, often contradicts himself or goes back on his earlier judgements, and even provides an "alternate version" of one episode. Instead of providing the omniscient perspective expected of the conventional narrative voice, Owen's narrator calls into question the assumption that an artist can see inside his characters and, especially, the claims of male artists to understand women.

The problem of narrative perspective is further complicated by the fact that the camera does penetrate into aspects of the women's relationship of which the narrator cannot be aware. Is this to be taken as a sign of the intervention of an author who knows more than the narrator or are we simply seeing the narrator's reconstruction of events based on what he does know? The narrator does admit towards the end that the true subject of the film may not be the friendship between Donna and Gail but a schizophrenic split in his own personality. Owen has also suggested that this division also expresses the personality of the author:

That film, although it's apparently about two working class girls (and that's really what it's about, of course: it's about two girls and the relationship between them), for me *personally* expresses my own particular kind of schizophrenia—my teeter-tottering between two worlds, one sensual and worldly, and the other reticent and spiritual and retiring.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever level of interpretation is adopted, however, the effect is to confront the spectator with the sheer difficulty involved in the processes of perception and communication and in distinguishing between objective and subjective vision. These difficulties are inherent in the artistic process and are encountered even when the subject is willing, as Owen demonstrates in *Ladies and Gentlemen*,

*Mr. Leonard Cohen* (1966).<sup>6</sup> The narrative screens set up in *Donna and Gail*, however, are rendered even more opaque by Gail's hostility and Donna's fantasies so that the problem of "knowing" becomes central to our experience of the film.

By focussing on the short-lived friendship of Donna and Gail, Owen shows the implications of this apparently formal problem on the plane of human relationships. The narrator explains the friendship in terms of the dominance of the stronger, more practical Gail over the more passive Donna. But what we see is that Donna begins to take over Gail. They take an apartment together because Gail wants to make sure that Donna will get to work on time, but both arrive late on the day they are fired. Their new freedom from daily routine is celebrated in a children's playground and this sequence marks the culmination of Gail's tendency to be drawn into Donna's child-like vision. The film in fact charts Gail's growing attraction to Donna's refusal of the constraints of adulthood and then her rejection of this attraction as Donna becomes increasingly incapable of any practical activity, just as the exhilaration of the playground sequence gives way to their entrapment in the city traffic that conceals them and drowns their voices as they search for new jobs. Although the two women separate, the narrator argues that Gail's strength has helped Donna and that Donna has brought out Gail's best qualities. This judgement is questionable because his own attraction to Donna seems to be based on her enigmatic, passive nature, suggesting that his definition of Gail's "best qualities" may be based on a rejection of her strength and independence. In any case, the possibility of merging the best of both women, or of the two sides of the narrator's personality, has been raised and has come to nothing.

It comes to nothing partly because of genuine difficulties in human interaction but mainly because their society increases rather than mitigates these difficulties. The problem is that the values of the adult world are based on assumptions about "knowledge" and "truth" which Owen's cinema challenges and which do not make the passage from childhood to adulthood attractive to those who want to explore themselves and their environment. In *Nobody Waved Goodbye* the adults—Peter's parents, the probation officer, the owner of the parking lot—claim to know about his problems and to have solutions to them, but their well-defined world only imprisons him and prevents him from defining himself or coming to terms with his relationship with Julie. Society separates the "real" world of adult responsibility from the fantasy world of childhood with the result that characters

like Peter, Donna, and Ernie in *The Ernie Game* (1967) refuse to become adults. This refusal of the adult world can have positive results in the artistic communities that Owen documents in films like *Toronto Jazz* (1963) and *Cowboy and Indian* (1972), although even here there is frustration since the artists have to communicate with a potential audience formed by "adult" values. In the fiction films, repression leads to distortion of the child-like vision while a rejection of the adult world leads only to inertia and increased confusion.

Owen sees the artist as someone who challenges the rules of the adult world by asserting the value of playfulness in art and life. In *Mr. Leonard Cohen*, during a television interview, Cohen is asked to cut his "con-act" and reveal the "real truth" about his poetry. He responds with a question of his own: "Is wrestling fixed?" By entering into the spirit of Cohen's performance, the film reveals the futility of searching for such truths, to the point that it becomes difficult to accept such (rare) omniscient comments by the narrator as that Cohen's interest in youth is "genuine". We see Cohen perform on television, in a recording studio, in public readings, in home movies, among his friends, and finally in the editing room where he comments on rushes from the film and speculates on the implications of his allowing himself to be filmed in his bath. The insights gained cannot explain the phenomenon of Leonard Cohen and the film becomes a lively and informal depiction of the phenomenon, leaving us to assess the various levels of performance as well as the complicity of the film-makers in provoking and presenting them.

Cohen also performs at a party in *The Ernie Game* and his song helps to define Ernie's own performance, dealing as it does with a man who "wants to trade the game he knows for shelter". Donna and Gail reappear as the women between whom the male persona oscillates in his search for "shelter" and who are both attracted to and frustrated by his "game". Like Peter in *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, Ernie is an artist without a vocation (nobody can read his writing) and he erects a playful façade against a society that is pressuring him into conformity and responsibility. But he cannot escape from his material needs, even if he does escape from the landlady who comes for his rent in the opening sequence. As with Peter, his acts of rebellion—stealing from both women, car theft, even an abortive attempt at armed robbery—reveal his inability to find alternatives to the values of the society that has formed him. He tells an older woman who may or may not be his mother that he wants to be treated as a person not as a case history; but once again he can define normality

only in the terms set by his society. He tells her that he wants a job, wife and home; if he is normal he will accept the "security" of family life, if not he belongs in the mental asylum he has (probably) just left at the opening of the film. It is also revealing that, like Donna in *Donna and Gail*, his fantasies revolve around his family, especially when he tries to win sympathy by telling confusing stories about the deaths of his parents.

Ernie's uncertainty about his identity and background is reflected in the film's style and structure. Either we have too little information (as in the sequence with Ernie's "mother") or we have to cope with the contradictory stories told by Ernie, while Owen keeps us off-balance with unexpected cuts, shifting perspectives, and apparently unmotivated camera movements. At the beginning of the party sequence, the camera pans up the body of a woman who turns and says, "I just read your mind"; a cut reveals that she is talking to Ernie but the momentary uncertainty raises the question of the voyeurism of the spectator and relates it to the issue of reading other people's minds that Owen explored in *Donna and Gail*. Ernie's game expresses his resistance to being "known" and his unpredictability does frustrate those who want to see him as a case history. But it also prevents any possibility of the kind of human commitment that he also needs. He is continually looking in mirrors and in one sequence envisages himself dressed in a variety of different outfits—ending up in Donna's clothes. This narcissism suggests a search for a real self among the many images that he projects but his actual entrapment is expressed in the many shots that show him behind glass.

Ernie's "game" is a protest against a society which tries to force its members to accept ready-made definitions of their roles, but it cannot protect him from the uncertainties and contradictions that underlie the apparently clear distinctions established by this social order. For Owen to claim to penetrate inside his characters would be to imitate society's desire for social and/or psychological explanations ("case histories"):

. . . nobody ever tells you anything about the characters, no information is provided, the reason for doing anything is completely unclear because I think it never is clear . . . I'm playing, and I hope that everybody enjoys the game, that's all.<sup>7</sup>

It would be dangerous, however, to confuse Owen's game with Ernie's. Whereas Ernie's game prevents commitment and rejects all established "rules", Owen plays with the "rules" of conventional



cinema to express the need for a commitment and self-definition based not on the passive acceptance of pre-existing values but on an active response to one's environment. Ernie cuts himself off from established values but is unable to cope with the resulting disorder. His hold on reality gradually disintegrates and the only resolution to his state of inertia and impotence becomes suicide.

The suicide attempt is presented in an extremely dislocated manner which corresponds to Ernie's state of mind and the film ends before the pills have taken effect, leaving us to wonder whether Donna will respond to his incoherent telephone call for help. Looking out of his window (as he was at the beginning of the film), Ernie sees children in a school playground surrounded by wire fences and dominated by a Canadian flag. His final (?) vision is of a society which imprisons children in order to educate them for adult life and which sees game-playing as incompatible with adult responsibility. The vision is bleak, but to have shown Ernie achieving an active and balanced response would have been to deny the need for such a response from the spectator. Instead Owen sets up a tension between the attractiveness of Ernie's unpredictability and the exasperation that he causes in others, between the sense that his lies and games represent a refreshing challenge to social constraints and an awareness that they only intensify his alienation. Owen's strategies encourage the spectator to participate in this tension: as Robert Fulford put it, this is "open-mesh filming, lots of gaps, lots of questions unanswered. It demands participation."<sup>8</sup>

Judging by the often outraged response to the film when it was shown by the CBC in 1967, not many people did enjoy Owen's game, perhaps because of the participation it demanded, because of its disconcerting shifts in tone from comedy to pathos, and because of "Owen's skill at luring the audience into caring and then alienating them the moment they did."<sup>9</sup> Owen did not make another feature film for nine years and, when he did, *Partners* must have seemed a much safer project because it could rely on the known conventions of the thriller genre. In fact, the thriller elements give the action a sense of urgency and direction not found in the earlier films, but the certainties of the American genre film are finally seen to be as unsatisfying in the modern Canadian context as they are in *The Ernie Game* (in which Ernie's venture into crime with his American friend is a comic failure) and in *Cowboy and Indian* (in which the two artist friends adopt the opposed personae of the western genre and children's games). The Hollywood cinema is associated in all of

Owen's films with the imposition of alien myths on Canadian experience or with the presence of Americans—as in *The Ernie Game* and, more crucially, in *Partners*.

The film opens with Paul, the American, literally invading the tranquil upper-class family home in which Heather is studying a maple leaf under a microscope. As a counterpoint to the American genre elements, Heather's family provides a framework of cultural values previously absent from the materialistic bourgeois world of *Nobody Waved Goodbye* and from the rootless existence of English-Canadians in Montreal in *Donna and Gail* and *The Ernie Game*. Yet this impression of assured identity quickly gives way to an awareness that no-one in this film can be seen as simply "Canadian". The origins and values of the family are effectively defined by their "English" accents, maintained despite centuries in Canada, and their "breeding" as opposed to the ruthless pragmatism of the Americans. By tracing this opposition back to its roots in the American revolution and by exploring its sexual dimension in the relationship of Heather and Paul, Owen makes explicit the colonial structures which create the alienation depicted in the earlier films. In *Partners* the old colonisers are shaken out of their complacency by the aggression of the new colonisers who, despite their repeated claims to the contrary, treat Canada as they would a South American banana republic.

The historical conflict between English and American influences can be related to the schizophrenic divisions in Owen's earlier films. Heather and Paul are drawn to each other because they represent the opposite poles of experience: he finds "security" in her sense of belonging to history, while she is attracted to the "excitement" that he offers. Yet the apparently clear-cut oppositions are not as simple as they at first seem. At their first meeting Heather and Paul respond to each other in terms of stereotypes, fitting each other into preconceived definitions, but he tells her that they must learn to surprise themselves. Through Paul's discovery of the journals of Adam Grey, Heather's ancestor, we are taken back to the point of divergence of the English and American traditions during what is called the War of Rebellion or of Independence depending on point-of-view. A flashback shows two friends, separated by their divided loyalties but wearing indistinguishable uniforms, one of whom restrains a shot as the other crosses a stream that marks the border. The tensions between political and human ties, between natural and social boundaries, continue into the present with the Canadian identity being assimilated into loyalty to old colonial values, and American in-

dependence into a new colonial oppression. At the end of the film the shot restrained in the past is fired, and the possibility of new structures begins to emerge.

The film is full of assertions of independence (or rebellion): Heather's father in his resistance to the Americans, Heather's taking up of photography, Paul's defiance of his employers, and (ironically) the killer's similar defiance at the end. Yet there is also a stress on the need to balance independence with an awareness of mutual interdependence, as in the gradual coming together of Paul and Heather's father. For Heather the experience of jail makes her look at herself and become aware of social and human complexity. She and Paul become partners in love and partners in crime: partnership implies equality but the Americans want to take over the Canadian company and Heather comes to fear that Paul may be taking her over. The American corporate structure is based on a hierarchy of pressures which generates polarisation and violence, whereas partnership demands mutual respect and openness. While the developing relationship of Heather and Paul cannot prevent the assassination of her father (with a bullet intended for Paul), it does provide a tentative alternative to the rigid structures of past and present. As they part at the airport, they agree to leave their relationship "open" with "no promises, no regrets".

The firing of the gun at the end of the film binds together past and present and relates the social and political aggression to the film's treatment of sexual roles. When Paul accidentally shoots a pheasant, Heather curses men and their "fucking guns" and compares him to Adam Grey, the pioneer who left the U.S. with an axe and a gun to clear his land and defend it. The parallel development of social and sexual history is suggested by the "fucking guns" that serve male possessiveness and destructiveness, while this idea is extended into the business world by the American executive's comment that the Canadians are "as nervous as virgins at an orgy". But Owen's treatment of sexuality presents an alternative to this aggressive approach: before Heather and Paul make love for the first time, he asks her if she wants to fuck; she objects to the term as "too mechanical" and proposes instead an "exchange of fantasies". The love scene that follows is both frank and lyrical, but their relationship cannot escape from the pressures of their environment. They come to feel that they have been "fucked by history" and they exorcise this feeling when they make love with her wearing a soldier's uniform and him in a dress. After this "perverse" love-making, he covers her with the dress

and puts on the uniform; but Heather's attraction to Barbara continues the concern with sexual exploration and her father's death means that she takes control of the previously all-male board of his company.

*Partners* thus expresses the need for and the possibility of a radical re-interpretation of social and sexual roles, and it does this by using the thriller genre to create a polarisation which helps to define the issues whose complexity overwhelms Owen's earlier protagonists. Adam Grey embodies the origins of the North American version of the myth of the dominant male which is maintained in both Heather's patriarchal family and in the masculine aggressiveness of American corporate society. In the earlier films, male dominance is seen as central to the family structure of bourgeois society but the actual males we see are impotent in the face of the anonymous forces of corporate consumer society. Paradoxically, social values have become so internalised that it is women who usually reinforce the pressures of a patriarchal society: thus Julie comes to second his mother's demands on Peter in *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, the women in the garment factory in *Donna and Gail* cross class and sex lines to support the foreman's disapproval of Donna's unpredictability, and the difficulty of coping with her situation as a single mother leads Donna in *The Ernie Game* to challenge Ernie with his inability to support her and her child.

While the characters in these earlier films remain trapped within the dominant ideology, the spectator is given a critical perspective that allows an awareness of the social forces at work in the obliterated environment. Only in *Partners* do the characters achieve, tentatively, some part of this awareness for themselves and reach a point where positive action can be seen as possible. John Hofsess has complained that there is nowhere in English-Canadian cinema "a character with the brains, balls, will or gall to master life as it must be lived in the twentieth century", and Owen's films certainly confirm this feeling of emasculation by the forces of technological capitalism.<sup>10</sup> But they also reveal the cost of the aggressiveness required to "master" this social reality and they assert the need for a parallel restructuring of social and sexual roles. The idea of partnership does not imply passive acceptance but rather an active response based on the same kind of balancing of sympathy and critical alertness that Owen's cinema tries to create in its audience. The need for this kind of response is implicit in the structure and vision of the earlier films, it is explicit in *Part-*

ners, and we can only hope that one day Owen will be given the opportunity to try to make contact once more with Canada's obliterated audiences.

## NOTES

1. Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 18.
2. A notable exception was the sensitive review by Eleanor Beattie in *Cinema Canada*, No. 32, October 1976, pp. 27-8.
3. Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. iii.
4. Paul-Louis Martin, "Sérieux trop sérieux", *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 179, p. 77.
5. Owen, "Adrift in a Sea of Mud", *Take One*, Vol. 1, no.6, p. 4.
6. This film was co-directed by Owen and Donald Brittain. Owen "considers it mostly Brittain's film". But Brittain seems to have taken over and continued the project in the spirit in which Owen had started it. Its questioning attitude towards direct cinema places it firmly in the context of Owen's cinema, although a similar approach can be found in other NFB films of the period, eg. Koenig and Kroitor's *Stravinsky* (1965).
7. Owen, "Adrift", p. 6.
8. Quoted in Natalie Edwards, "Who's Don Owen?", *Cinema Canada*, No. 8, June/July 1973, p. 37.
9. Edwards, "Who's Don Owen?", p. 37.
10. John Hofsess, *Inner Views* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1975), pp. 67, 69.