

Owen Land *Dialogues*

Tuesday, December 1, 2009 — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

The renowned Owen Land (maker of the justifiably celebrated *Remedial Reading Comprehension* [1970]; *On the Marriage Broker Joke as Cited by Sigmund Freud in Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious or Can the Avant-Garde Artist Be Wholed?* [1977–79] and *Wide Angle Saxon* [1975]) returns with his long-awaited semi-autobiographical *Dialogues*, a work that finally reveals Land's mysterious exploits after he ventured back to Los Angeles in the mid-1980s—a time, according to the filmmaker, “for much soul-searching about his relationships with women (and with strippers).” Filled with playful segments lifted or inverted from familiar films and scored by music ripped from the dustbin of popular culture, *Dialogues*' episodic structure contains “events which are more speculative, or imaginative, than literally real.” (Jonathan Marlow)

Funny, sad, touching, bizarre, brilliant...

— Mark Toscano

Dialogues (2009) by Owen Land; digital video, color, sound, 120 minutes, exhibition DVD from the maker

Scott Foundas: You mentioned James Joyce in your book [*Two Films by Owen Land*, 2005, edited by Mark Webber]. Was he an influence on *Dialogues*?

Owen Land: There are obvious parallels between *Dialogues* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. I tried to make them more obvious by using phrases like “Odious Osculation Occurred Odoriferously”—a reference to the catechism chapter of *Ulysses*. This almost borders on a parody of Joyce. Both *Dialogues* and *Ulysses* have a Circe episode. I last read *Ulysses* in 1961, and I don't remember very much of it, but I recently re-read the Circe episode, and I found that Joyce also interpreted Circe as a dominatrix, like in *Dialogues*. Joyce's Circe, a whore, turns Leopold Bloom into a pig in the figurative sense, not literally. Bloom wallows in his lechery. In *Dialogues*, Circe is more of a personification of Evil, a kind of Devil. But we must remember that, in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus becomes her lover, and lives with her for a year. So she must have had an attractive side.

SF: And those shadow play characters?

OL: Well, they refer to Plato's allegory of the cave in the *Republic*, as well to the Three Weird Sisters in MacBeth. They're actually bird demons, which appear in many mythologies of the world. All these things are Jungian archetypes: The Witch, the Evil Goddess, the Dominatrix, the bird demon—we could include the female as vampire, too.

SF: The autobiographical angle was interesting. How many of those events actually happened to you?

OL : Well, when I was on Aeaea—just kidding! They all happened. None of them happened. Both statements are true. All of the episodes are based on actual experiences of mine. I really knew a hatcheck girl. Her name was Rhonda. She didn't have a car, though. But I knew another young woman who loved her Mazda Miata. She moved to Rome, and sold the car for more than she paid for it. I would never have intercourse while driving. I'm a very safe driver. Even the radio is too distracting to me. Bridget McBride is a condensation of at least four real people. Her name combines elements of two art students I knew, Bridget Brine and Kyle McBride (a female Kyle!) And there were a lot of aggressive art groupies around in the 1960s and 1970s—which is why male artists loved to appear on the college circuit.

SF: The Okinawa bar scene looks like it might have really happened.

OL: Yes, that dialog is pretty much verbatim, but it was spoken by more than one bar girl. They all say, “Buy me a beer.” It's their *raison d'être*. In Okinawa, in 1984, a glass of beer cost ten dollars. You could have bought a six-pack of Heineken in the states for less than that. (I've since given up drinking beer.) Okinawa City was a place of absurdities. I like absurdity.

SF: How so?

OL: I was brought up absurd. Do you know the book *Growing Up Absurd* by Paul Goodman? That perfectly describes my childhood.

SF: Okinawa seems like an off-the-beaten-path place to be. Why were you there?

OL: I had a grant that required me to stay in Japan for a year. It was freezing cold in Tokyo, and the houses don't have central heat. I had to go someplace warm. Okinawa is politically a part of Japan, but it's south of the other Japanese islands. It's closer to Taiwan. I was doing night photography there, combining flash with moonlight and streetlights. Okinawa—the district near the U.S. Marine and Navy bases—was the perfect place to do that. The Japanese consulate found me a place to stay right in the middle of that district. The bars stayed open almost all night long. It was like an American wild west frontier town. Soldiers, sailors, and marines had fistfights in the streets. A lot of the buildings had been reduced to rubble during major battles of the Pacific War. They never bothered to repair them.

SF: I'd better choose my words carefully, or I'll become one of the film critics you make fun of in *Dialogues*. You mentioned Paul Arthur a lot.

OL: I used actual quotes from Paul Arthur's articles in *Artforum*. He said I had a tendency to use "words with long O sounds." I don't know what he was referring to. But I thought I should try it, so I put together a monolog using only words with long O sounds. And he called me "an iconoclast among iconoclasts." I couldn't resist taking that literally, and breaking an icon [in the episode *Sic Transit Gloria Mundi*].

SF: And the reference to Anger's "Dream Lover" sequence. You mentioned that that was inspired by a film critic.

OL: Yes. P. Adams Sitney, writing about *Wide Angle Saxon*, said the scene where Earl Greaves is polishing his Cadillac was a reference to the "Dream Lover" sequence [from Anger's *Kustom Kar Kommandos*]. It's not what I had in mind at all, but Sitney and Mark Webber didn't believe me when I told them that. Why wouldn't I be truthful about something like that? So to show them what a real pastiche of the "Dream Lover" sequence would look like, I put one in *Dialogues*. Notice the changes I made. Instead of a hot rod, the car is an SUV—the car of choice of the 1980s, '90s and maybe now. The song Anger used, "Dream Lover," is all about teenage girl fantasies of "a boy to love." He used a cover version. The song was first sung by a male singer about "a girl to love." The Patti Smith song I used is very frankly about sexual passion. It's the difference between the popular culture of 1963 and that of the late 1970s. And instead of a male teenager in tight jeans, I used a female in revealing clothes. Don't you like her better?

SF: I do, yes. But...

OL: I know. The gays are taking over the world. Someday heterosexuals will be like dinosaurs. And, like dinosaurs, the human race will become extinct. (Owen Land interviewed by Scott Foundas, 2009. Unpublished.)

"I think people who see avant-garde films are more accustomed to seeing short films, whereas people who only go to conventional features have to have the whole plot structure in order to understand what's going on," says Land, who shot the material for *Dialogues* last year (entirely in L.A., though there are scenes set as far afield as Toronto and Okinawa) [...]. "This film can be shown either way. So, when all of the fifty more or less episodes are put together in the correct order—I say "correct," but there's really no correct order. There'll probably be variations. Each copy might be different.'" (Scott Foundas, "Avant-gardist Owen Land Comes Out of the Shadows." *LA Weekly*, June 25, 2008. www.laweekly.com/2008-06-26/film-tv/land-ho/1)

"There are two things you should know about me. One is that I'm a follower of Christ, and the other is that I'm a follower on the path of tantra." (Owen Land, quoted in Foundas, 2008)