

Scholar's Evolutionary DVD Explores Possibility

Back in the early 1990s, in the then-relatively undeveloped Yal-town section of downtown Vancouver, there was an organization called the Centre for Image and Sound Research, or CISR. It was devoted to visual and audio arts in the digital age and served as an early home base for a lot of people who were excited about computers, electronically created music, digital art, the possibilities of telepresence, virtual environments—the whole heady pre-Web mix. Many of us were introduced to the place by the late Vancouver social agitator Ian Hunter, an old college-newspaper friend of mine who was contracted to create a data bank of the local artistic community.

I don't actually recall that he ever completed that project, but he collaterally brought together a hotbed of people who became the senior educators, multimedia producers, and Web developers of today. I first met Oliver Hockenhull at CISR in December of 1993, when we were both among the crowd of people hired to contribute to a Web site about art and computers called ANIMA. Not only was the site ambitious in scope, it was also among the first couple of thousand Web sites ever made, and probably one of the very first where people were actually paid for its creation.

I didn't really work with Hockenhull, but during the many enthusiastic conversations we all had in those days, I recall his contributions as being among the most thoughtful and relentlessly intelligent. Sometimes he had to explain things to me, as he had a different take on technology than the rest of us, who generally fell into predictable stereotypes: wacky artists and deranged computer geeks mainly. He really had a big-picture view that often eluded me down in the trenches of hypertext architecture. If I had to choose two words to describe my impression of him, they'd be "philosophical scholar".

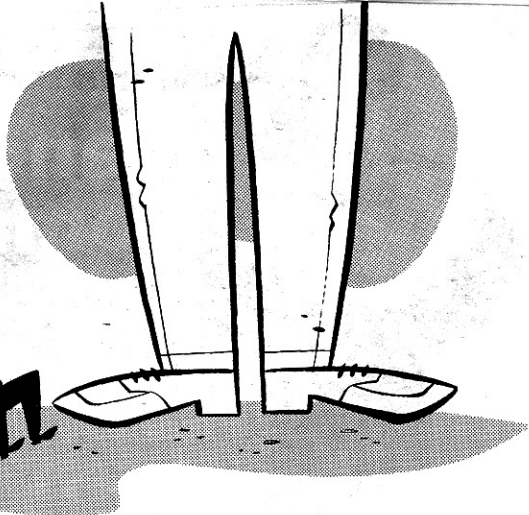
Hockenhull and I lost touch in the mid-'90s, although I later heard he had become an independent documentary filmmaker of some repute for a work called *Aldous Huxley: The Gravity of Light*, which *Variety* praised for its hip and innovative approach to the genre. Hockenhull's newest work is *EVO*, which we met up in a café to discuss. It's a film that has been shown at several international festivals, from Victoria to Amsterdam, and Hockenhull has also presented university lectures based on his vision of the future of creativity. (Both films are available at Video Out Distribution; phone 604-872-8449.

Note that these films are only offered on DVD-R.

Although he came from a background in traditional art, Hockenhull says he became fascinated with the possibilities offered by laser discs early on, and since his take on art involved the changing of things over time ("the world as made up of transmutable objects"), he easily clicked into the world of digital ("It's just code and you can turn it into anything"). Also, he finds the mental engagement of creating art similar to that of learning a piece of software or a programming language. "It demands a level of attention and intoxication with the task, the same as if you're doing a painting."

But *EVO* is also a unique DVD product, one that offers more than just the linear progression of scenes shown at festivals and on European TV stations. In DVD form it becomes what Hockenhull describes as a digital essay on questions of evolution and consciousness featuring eminent evolutionist and Oxford professor Richard Dawkins. There are four "mutant edit" options that play the film back in alternative versions, plus supplemental material like (Macintosh-only) artificial-intelligence software and links to more material on the Web.

"Film is still a very conservative medium," Hockenhull says, "and even the experimental



groups within it are not thinking in terms of the potential of DVD. For example, you could make a film where the version you saw would vary depending on the time of day you saw it at. The question isn't randomizing [access to scenes], it's structural engagement with all that material, a tool that can tweak a presentation according to different variables: audience response, even the weather."

"[With *EVO*] I went as far as I could towards that ideal, with the money and time that I had. It's a prototype, because you can add new material to the mutated versions that allow for another understanding to develop. When I first thought of it [using the DVD format], I wanted it so that people would get a different version every time. That's still a possibility, but it would've required resources I wasn't capable of getting."

The result is still very interesting. At heart, *EVO* is a thoughtful and well-researched documentary (I don't use the word *scholar* lightly when I describe Hockenhull) that took two years to research, shoot, and edit. On top of that, it's visually stunning, with all kinds of unusual layers of art, video, and effects made possible by digital production techniques, yet those treatments never come across as flashy or frivolous, probably

because the core content is so strong. It looks wonderful and it makes you think.

"After the Vancouver International Film Festival showing, a geneticist came up and told me it was like the things he sees in his mind," says Hockenhull. "Younger people tend to like the work too. I think filmmakers and other media makers find it difficult, because they've invested so much in a particular way of conceiving film, in the old way of understanding the medium. They're affronted by it."

Despite the possibilities of digital, Hockenhull sees a lot of unused potential in what we already have at hand. Take 3D animation: "I don't understand why there's such a reliance on replicating reality when you're not dealing with issues like gravity in a virtual space." Or the Internet: "We use it as a TV, a newsstand, and a way to send letters to one another, but we're not really using what we've got. Sometimes things will pop up like Internet radio; it's really great that a group or some person is streaming audio to you. Maybe in the future you don't actually send someone your DVD, you send them a program that will access databases of image sequences. I think most of us are five or 10 years behind the times of our technology. It's capable of so much." ■

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