

Script for an interview in which Giovanna C. Coppola asked Chad McCail a series of questions to which he responded in front of two of his works, *Rites of Spring (A story for adolescents in 12 pictures)* and *Monoculture*. Questions and answers were worked out by email and conversation and this script was produced which formed the basis for the interview which was attended by around 40 people at 43 Inverness Street on July 2nd, 2011.

1. Could you explain the story about the Rites of Spring? I'm sure each of us who have looked at the work closely have come up with our own narratives, but I'd like to hear yours.

It's about the sexual initiation of a boy and girl. Before setting off on a journey, they are each given a knife by an elderly couple. The knife will serve them later in the story but I thought that to give an adolescent a knife was also a way of marking that they have reached a certain level of maturity, that they can take responsibility for themselves.

After an arduous journey on foot they arrive at a tree with flowers which look like human genitals. At the base of the tree is a human skeleton. I thought that perhaps when an elderly person was dying he or she was brought to the tree and died there, the nutrients from the decaying body nourishing the tree.

When they find the tree, they copulate with the flowers. I wanted to suggest that one's first experience of sexuality is not so much about the relationship within which the experience occurs but about one's own experience of the drive itself.

As they begin, a root rises from the ground and threatens to strangle them. Using their knives, they cut themselves free and escape with the root.

Afterwards, as they wash themselves in a pool, snakes emerge from the severed roots and they return home with these emblems of their awakened sexuality.

2. When does the story take place? It seems like a combination of a mythical past and the present.

The clothes indicate the present though of course it is a fable and so it's situated in a kind of timeless present.

The pit where the tree grows looks man-made though it blends with the surrounding rock formations. The tree is a monster. Perhaps it suckers. Its roots make it look as though it might. Perhaps a thousand years ago it ran wild and had to be contained so that the pit was built for it far from human habitation.

3. I know that you are a great fan of science fiction and one can think of your work having a science fiction element, but this series also seems religious to me,

in that sense that it resembles a sort of biblical story that aims to teach us something. What do you think this message could be?

The message is really that we should take this transition from childhood to maturity and the development of the sexual drive more seriously; that we should acknowledge that the acquisition of fertility is traumatic, exciting, disorientating and emotionally destabilizing. That young people are particularly vulnerable at this stage and equally that they are quite dangerous to one another too. Adolescents can suffer cruelties which scar them for a long time. This newly acquired ability involves a certain struggle and challenge. It is an important part of the process of individuation.

In this emotional turbulence people can be cruel, others can be hurt. More is demanded of them. Responsibilities increase. People get infatuated, attached, they treat each other like things, they use each other. They become possessed by this thing.

So that in the story, when they copulate with the tree it tries to strangle them, it wants to consume them, it's hungry; it will have them if they don't tear themselves away. It's indifferent, implacable and inhuman.

When they cut themselves free, they exercise control over their desire and the root they take away turns into a snake (also a symbol of wisdom) and when they cross back over the boundary wall it becomes invisible, simply an emblem of their awakened, mature sexuality.

4. Could you tell us more about the tree? There was a genital tree similar to this one in your 2007 screen print, "*Relationships grow stronger*." In that work, the tree is on a trolley and is about to be planted in the garden by a family of multiple generations. In that work, there is a positive message of a family and their maturity in dealing with sexuality and relations among the sexes. In "*Rites of Spring*", however, the tree is more sinister and tries to kill the young man and woman as they have sex with it. What is the symbolic value of the tree in this work? How and why has it changed from its appearance in "*Relationships grown stronger*"?

The tree reproduces and consumes. It stands for the indifferent, persistent, intransigent quality of desire.

I imagined the tree had developed somewhat similarly to the bee orchid whose flowers resemble a bee's genitals and also like the carnivorous plants, which attract insects to consume. It tries to kill the young people not from malice but simply because it is hungry. Symbolically I wanted that to stand for the addictive desperation of the pleasure principle, the shadow of love. But it also reinvigorates, regenerates and the girl and boy return from their ordeal with the boon, the snake, their mature individuated ability to master the drive.

The encounter is more intimate in *Rites of Spring*. In *Relationships grow stronger* the children have rucksacks too. They are about to go on the journey. The tree in

that picture has genital flowers even on the higher branches. It is like afloat from a pageant. Perhaps they tow it through the village before setting off on the adventure depicted in Rites of Spring.

Also there is no skeleton. It is shown in its benign aspect.

The post- Jungian Robert Moore talks about archetypes as those patterns towards which one is powerfully attracted but which, were one to identify too closely with them, would destroy one. He sees the human ego as surrounded by drives to which it is drawn but to which it surrenders at its peril. I wanted the tree to have that quality of fatal mesmerism.

5. To continue with symbols, what is the snake a symbol of? They come out of the severed root of the tree and they seem benign whereas usually the serpent has negative connotations. Why do the snakes appear and then disappear, or rather grown invisible? Why can't they remain visible?

The snake is an ancient symbol. Its ability to shed its skin gives it the apparent quality of rebirth and immortality. This facility identifies it with the seasonal cycle, the dying of vegetation in the autumn and its re-emergence in the spring. Shown in a circle with its tail in its mouth, the ouroboros expresses that continuity – everything feeds on everything else, nothing is lost and the individual parts make up a greater whole.

Within this economy birth and death lose some of their absolute quality and a greater dynamic becomes apparent, a flowing continuum where things form and dissolve to reform and re-dissolve endlessly.

More specifically in the Hindu tantric tradition the snake appears as kundalini and is identified as desire. It is depicted inside a person stretching from the genitals to the head.

In Genesis, an anthropocentric, male dominated, hierarchical perspective replaces the older, broader view. In this reversal of values the snake is cast down and acquires its purely negative aspect.

The snakes become invisible in the last frame because the young people have passed back over the boundary wall. The snakes, although invisible, can still be felt, a closer approximation to the tantric reality.

The boundary wall is from Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy where the hero on his quest into the land of the dead has encounters a dry stone wall which marks the boundary between the living and the dead. Also in Werner Herzog's documentary *Grizzly Man* an Inuit museum curator says of the film's subject that he tried to cross a boundary between man and animal that cannot be crossed.

6. I have the uncomfortable sense of being a voyeur when looking at these paintings as if i'm spying on a very personal and private act. Yet I also get the

sense that I'm being shown a story, that something is being revealed to me, as if a curtain has been drawn open. Was that intentional in your composition planning?

I did try not to make the images salacious but there are four, (*Undressing, Pit, Escape* and *Pool*) where the foliage in the corners of the picture suggest that the viewer is hiding in the undergrowth. While that's unfortunate, and partly due to compositional error, I wonder if it contributes to this sense of something being revealed. It wasn't intentional.

Upstairs

8. Can you explain to us what kind of school this is in "*Monoculture*"? What kind of world are these students being prepared for?

It's a composite school. There is a primary school below and a secondary above. It's modeled on the Scots system but is more or less applicable to Europe and the USA and is the model exported around the globe.

There is a classroom for every year so that one crisscrosses upward from the entrance at the base to the exit at the top. That exit is for 16 year olds though further stairs indicate that the structure continues to rise for those who are training for the more privileged management and strategic roles. (Those leaving at 16 generally move into subordinate positions with minimal responsibilities.) So the children are being conditioned for a hierarchical structure.

In *The Underground History of Education*, John Taylor Gatto argues that this model of compulsory education was invented in Prussia in 1819 when the Prussian gov't, still smarting from their defeat by Napoleon when the country was overrun and occupied by the French, set about welding their country into an industrial power which would be able to hold it's own.

During the extended national debate triggered by the Prussian Reform Movement Johann Fichte's proclamation that, "Education should provide the means to destroy free will.", was accepted.

Gatto says, "The Prussian mind, which carried the day, held a clear idea of what centralized schooling should deliver: 1) Obedient soldiers to the army; 2) Obedient workers for mines, factories, and farms; 3) Well-subordinated civil servants, trained in their function; 4) Well-subordinated clerks for industry; 5) Citizens who thought alike on most issues; 6) National uniformity in thought, word, and deed."

In 1831 Victor Cousins report to the French gov't applauded Prussia for discovering how to contain the danger of the industrial proletariat.

Then in 1864 the Prussians defeated the Austrians at the Battle of Koniggratz and in 1871 they wiped the floor with the French in the Franco-Prussian war.

The Prussians mobilized 1.2 million men in 18 days supplying, equipping and getting them to the front using the civilian rail network. By contrast the French, regarded as the foremost military power in Europe, were disorganized. The response of reservists to the call-up was half-hearted, the gathering of troops was disordered and the command structure confused.

The Prussians had upped the ante. The other European powers were shocked. Unless they got some of what the Prussians were using, they were toast. Victory was attributed in large part to the Prussian educational system.

Within 20 yrs most of Europe had compulsory education and it is the first generation of compulsorily educated Europeans who fight the Great War.

9. As the students grow older, they lose their individuality and begin to wear masks and look like robots. Masks play an important part of your overall work, Can you tell us more the importance of the mask? In this work, you can see students from time to time ripping off the mask of another student. Presumably these are bullies. Why would the removal of the mask be seen as something bad?

Masks are handed out by the teacher to the children in Primary 4 when the children are around 8 years old. By this time they've been in the institution for 3 years.

When the children arrive at school they see each other more or less as equals – with differences but essentially on a level with the teacher above. As they begin to absorb the values of the institution they start to see one another through the eyes of the teacher who sees better or worse pupils, obedient or disobedient students, sponges or stones. In one way or another the teacher rewards the obedient and good and punishes the disobedient and bad. The institution imposes an alien set of values and identities on the children.

In the picture I try to indicate this development with the masks the teacher hands out. Rectangular, robotic ones with an aerial for the “good” children who can intuit what the teacher wants, plain robotic for the middling students who can do what is necessary but do not crave the teacher's approval and skull-like masks for those who can't or won't do what the teacher demands. In this manner the emerging hierarchy becomes evident.

There are different scenarios involving the masks which the children wear for the rest of their lives: -

P4 The top students are handing out masks for the teacher. An unwilling student protests while a top student asks for the teacher's help.

P5 (corridor) A top student's mask is removed by low grade students in what is not necessarily an act of bullying but may be an act of resistance – someone who sees his friend seduced by the institution and seeks in an inarticulate way to

recover him.

P6 (corridor) The students are seen grouped together by masks as their new identities restructure their relationships.

10. It seems that you're trying to say that mass-education promotes sexual suppression and conformity. Do you think that there's a solution? Do you think that the education system has gotten better than it was 50 years ago?

Wilhelm Reich understood sexual repression to have a physiological expression. He understood that when the expression of a sexual impulse was punished its expression would be inhibited in future and that repeated and prolonged inhibition involved a tightening of the musculature to deaden the sensation which stimulated the impulse. He understood that this reflexive tightening of the muscles created a muscular block and that as inhibitions accumulated and more muscular blocks were created the body became inflexible and rigid. He called this reflexive locking of the muscles body armour or character armour. The armour defends the body against sensation. Reich understood that the armour accumulated in sections or rings rising from the abdomen to the chest, shoulders, neck, jaw and eyes so that eventually the subject is encased in a rigid exoskeleton of repressed desire.

I'm suggesting that children enter the school having already been subjected to a degree of sexual suppression in the home, a generalized cultural discomfort and unease with sexuality which they pick up when they are very young to a greater or lesser extent. Four scenarios are tiled to the walls on either side of the entrance at the base.

They've also seen men generally act in a superior manner to women and that pattern is reflected so that there is already a confusion about gender and sexuality, a weakening in the relationship between boys and girls and an opacity about what they are.

I've tried to indicate the weakening of the relationship between boys and girls in murals in the corridors next to the primary 1 and 2 corridors. The discomfort about their sexuality when they arrive at the school is shown in the first black band about the abdomen, indicative of the first section of armouring they acquire. In this case the armour is acquired to fight impulsive sexual curiosity.

In Primary 1, when they find that school is compulsory and they cannot leave, they acquire a second section of armour to defend themselves against the impulse to move or respond inappropriately.

They develop a third section of armour with which to stifle an awakened sexual interest in each other at puberty. I've situated that moment at the point when they leave the relative security of the local primary school where they've spent seven years amongst the same group and move to the much larger factory office environment of the secondary school where they are divided into different classes. Consequently the relationships that had formed between them are weakened.

My interest is in how compulsory school weakens the relationships between young people so they are more isolated and so more susceptible to commands above.

I visited Summerhill School in Suffolk. Pupils sign up for lessons with teachers or play or make things in the workshops which are busy. Lessons aren't compulsory. Once a week a meeting is held at which any matter can be raised. Decisions are made after debate and each child and adult has one vote. The effect is to give children responsibility from an early age so that they are used to exercising it. They are not patronized and I was struck by the way in which the children looked me in the eye without fear. Although it's a fee paying boarding school it's model bears scrutiny.