Hail Columbia! by Graeme Ferguson

In his recent book, 2001: A Space Odyssey, physiologist Gerard K. O'Neill offers a surprisingly revealing view of the future, predicting for instance that in 30 years' time we'll be shutting into space with the same frequency we take holiday cruises today. To some, this may sound like sheer science fiction but O'Neill's reasoning is both eloquent and inspiring. It's hard to resist his enthusiasm for super technology, especially the Space Shuttle, which he believes will shape our tomorrows the way the wheel shaped the past. Viewed in this light the world's first spaceport takes on global importance. It represents far more than just another example of Yankee ingenuity.

It is fitting then that there is a film to commemorate the maiden flight of the Columbia. A welcome surprise is that two Canadians, Graeme Ferguson and Roman Kroitor, were given the task, and they wisely chose to take a few quantum leaps beyond the ordinary by shooting their film, Hail Columbia! in IMAX. Only IMAX, with dimensions ten times greater than conventional 35mm film, could do justice to the Columbia's awesome spectacle and convey in its proper significance this historical event.

Both Ferguson (North of Superior) and Kroitor (Tiger Child) are veterans of the 36mm split screen, which makes it all the more disappointing that Hail Columbia! - even with its intoxicating visual dimensions - fails on almost every count as a film. Outside of 60 exhilarating seconds of footage showing the Columbia's breathtaking lift-off, the film rarely manages to rise above mediocrity.

For some inexplicable reason Ferguson and Kroitor are infatuated with split-screen techniques, which only serves to muddle the effect of IMAX and give the entire film an out-dated, Expo 67 feel. Even more disturbing is the way the two chose to ignore the grandness of the event, instead concentrating on a comparatively irrelevant side-show: will Columbia's tiles fall off during takeoff or re-entry? Yes, this was a consideration during the mission but the whole business has a somewhat trumped-up, boring ring to it.

Ferguson and Kroitor also miss the target when it comes to showing the activities surrounding launch. Instead of an international celebration we get something that resembles a Texas barbecue, with endless shots of wide-eyed Americans parading near the launch site, waving the stars and stripes, gulping their Budweiser beer.

Why two Canadians gave Hail Columbia! an entirely American slant probably has a lot to do with who financed the film. Nevertheless, it is inexcusable because Ferguson and Kroitor not only have made a poor film, but have missed a glorious opportunity to create a lasting celluloid document of a truly important event for future generations. Instead they've made a Yankee Doodle promo, the likes of which we've seen far too many.

Letters (cont. from p. 32)

Dear Sir,

I am a member of the Festival of Festivals board and was deeply distressed to read your column of Aug 21, which, in my opinion, did not portray the Festival in an accurate light.

As a board member I can assure you that the funds made available to the Festival for the past two years have been used wisely and have produced a valuable resource to the community. This film enjoys full support of the City of Toronto and the Southern Ontario Film Commission since the past two years.

Sincerely, 

[Signature]

letters@ctv.on.ca