

REVIEWS

Lois Siegel's

A 20th Century Chocolate Cake

Walter Benjamin once called the immediate reality of film "an orchid in the land of technology." But he wrote when the possibility of technology's bloom could still conjure up flowers instead of pesticides. Increasingly the barrenness of technology's landscape only reveals the inarticulate physicality of images of sullen human remnants confronting a world ever more alien. And if the filmmaker could once aspire to be a gardener, he must today face having become merely a technician in the extermination of weeds.

Lois Siegel's *A 20th Century Chocolate Cake*, a first low-low budget feature film by a Montreal experimental filmmaker, provides the occasion for some gloomy thinking about the price technology exacts upon human pretensions to creativity.

Made up of loosely connected absurd vignettes, *Chocolate Cake* purports to offer some insight into the problem of 20th century existence, and succeeds remarkably for reasons both external and internal to the film itself. The plotline of *Chocolate Cake* concerns two young men in their mid-20s, Gregory (Gregory Van Riel who co-scripted and co-produced) and Charles (played with irritating lasciviousness by Charles Fisch Jr.). At that point of contact in life when the world imposes itself (i.e., the need for regular money), Greg and Charles' friendship immediately crumbles as Charles, under the delusion that he's expressing himself, smoothly makes the transition to sexual commodification through dance (he becomes a stripper in a gay bar). Greg, more puzzled by the world after encountering the you-need-to-have-experience-in-order-to-get-experience conundrum of looking for work, opts instead for freelance human interest research, in the hope that other people's stories will shed some light on why the world is so unwelcome and forbidding.

The bulk of the film thus follows Greg in his quest for meaning, as he interviews (randomly) children, a gossip columnist (who expatiates on the eschatological significance of gossip), an executive who would rather be an artist, and more children. This whole is interspersed with more vignettes within vignettes: animistic creatures (a person wearing a papier-mâché rabbit head) run among traffic jams; BBC-style cool voice of doom radio announcements of a tidal wave engulfing the continental west coast; segments in speed-up of people wrapping authority figures in yellow toilet paper; interviews with educators on the hopelessness of the educational system; a nurse on the terror of growing old and incontinent in an institution...

Eventually Greg encounters a girl, Christine (evocatively conveyed by Jeannine Lasker), who sends telegrams to herself wishing she were there. She seems full of promise but nothing transpires. Greg meets Charles once more, now decidedly gay and so beyond the

pale of disinterested friendship. Greg gets beaten up in a bar and in the face of it all resigns himself to get a job. He goes to work in a bank until the day he robs the vault and drives off in a shiny TR-6, seemingly to escape only to collide head-on into the clutches of conformity that await all the characters who one-by-one turn into the walking wounded that pass for regular, normal people.

Chocolate Cake is semi-narrative and often self-indulgent, yet manages in startling detail to suggest a profound meditation on the nature of the contemporary technological entrapment, by playing both overtly and covertly on the many levels of man's dubious relation to machines. It is a film about the nostalgia for an impossible creativity: Greg searches for self-legitimacy through print, yet on film never writes a word. The film shows a 'writer' armed with a *tape-recorder* desperately seeking to find some truth through (recorded) *speech*. Instead of Truth/Art/Speech, there is only the (false) artifice of the image of the despairing body, for everything is technologically mediated, imprisoned in self-reproducing machinery (including the body which is only another form of machine that holds captive a self that wishes it were there but knows it is not).

Thus in what is to my mind the film's central metaphor, a girl (ex-secretary Lucie Tétrault who was fired from her job for Xeroxing her bottom as a party invitation) "reproduces" herself by exposing her "private" parts to the machine-eye of a mammoth photocopier. That which one might hesitate to do before human eyes, she does readily for the machine, and, double irony, the camera that is recording her cloning herself technologically.

In another scene, a giant (in other words a freak) physically pulls a dead car to which he is attached by a chain.

What seems to be merely the diversion of a feat of strength becomes instead a mythological representation of the heaviness of the burden borne by technological man.

In a further vignette, a man (Stephen Lack) drives his car into a garage and complains of a mechanical problem. The mechanic (that is, the expert) promptly takes the motor apart and refuses to put it together again, leaving the hapless motorist stranded, both unable to understand what has transpired and helpless to do anything about it. Hovering in the background are three motorcyclists whose tinted visors have effaced all traces of communicable humanity (eyes, mouth) as they drive around in grim semi-circles, like the Fates (or vultures) of technology.

This then is the world that Greg—with some reason—feels reluctant to join, for it is fully that of the modern wasteland, that superhighway of Sartrean No Exit.

Appropriately perhaps for a film about technological enslavement, the showing of *Chocolate Cake*, at its Montreal premiere, was not without its mechanical problems. Due to human error, the synch was off, the projection was fuzzy, and the film was torn. But due, on the other hand, to the personal charisma of director Siegel some 900 people turned up to cheer the film image of their friends on screen. The social role of being a filmmaker (which is another kind of imprisonment) thus triumphs over all considerations of content, which as McLuhan said, are irrelevant anyway.

Chocolate Cake (which took over four years to produce and had a crew of thousands) is its own wryly devoted form of tribute to filmmaking outside of the official cinematographic machine. It shows once again the tremendous potential of low-budget filmmaking in

this country and once again unveils the infinite imagistic range of Canadian locations: in *Chocolate Cake* Montreal is wondrously unrecognizable yet still itself.

Followers of Siegel's earlier work will find in *Chocolate Cake* an extended version in color of her 1978 25-minute *Recipe to Cook A Clown*, in which Greg Van Riel and Charles Fisch also appear. Steadily Siegel is getting a surer grip on what she wants to say through film.

Chocolate Cake shows a very powerful statement trying to emerge, like a blade of grass through the concrete. No orchid perhaps, but the gardeners are still hoping: Siegel and Van Riel have begun scripting a sequel, to be called *A 21st Century Lobotomy*. When Sartre defined man as a useless passion, he surely must have had filmmakers in mind.

Michael Dorland ●

A 20th CENTURY CHOCOLATE CAKE

p./d./ed. Lois Siegel/éc./co-p. Gregory Van Riel cinematography Peter Benison, Mike Rixon, Glen MacPherson, Lois Siegel, François Warot, Raymond Gravel, Serge Ladouceur, Donald Delorme, Georges Archambault, Ken Decker, Werner Wolkmmer, Daniel Villeneuve mus. André Vincelli anlm. Veronica Soul Lp. Van Riel, Charles Fisch Jr., Jeannine Lasker, Stephen Lack, Peter Brawley, The Great Antonio, Fonda Peters, Thomas Schnurmercher, Liliane Clune, Edouard Fellmann, Clément Sasseville, Nadia Verdi, Paul Delaney, Lucie Tétrault, Lita-Anne Dawn Lee, Lianne Faith Lewis, Ronald Blumer, Erasmus J. Rabbit, Yoshi Inoué, Bob Kuluza, Anna Vitre, Orner Siergher, Stella Dubois, Jason Pavlick, Alain Charly, David Callender, Judah Zelman, Sandra Clancey, Kevin Fenlon, S. Cairney, Saba Cottle, Ben Queenan, George Pandi, Peter Bierman, Bob Presner, Louise Cardinal, Dan McCorminn, Geoff Bowie, Eric Olson, Carolyn Maxwell, Fabiola Lamoureux, Allan Avriith, Linda Clarkson, Louis Gilbert, Arthur Bergerson, Kevin Tierney, Eugene Heller, Danny Avriith, Colin Kish, Dov Charney, Rose Nonen, Judi St. James, Anne Stratford, Barbara Katz, Robert Gibson, Peter Henbury, Guy Deschène, Jim Hill, Daphne Hill film doctor Albert Kish ad. Paul Turcotte, Mary Armstrong, Gilbert Lachapelle, Michel Charron, Donald Cohen, Ron Hallis, Richard Elson, Glen Hodgins, Gaby Vadny, Ray Roth, Tina Horne asst. cam. Peter Rosenfeld, Normand Belair, Keith Young, Mark Sherman, Rick Mackiewicz, Jonathan Goodwill elect. Donnie Cauffield, Claude Langlois, Gordon Caplan, Marcel Durand set decor. Lise Legaré stunt des. and performer. Denis Koufoudakis sp. eff. Marcel Fournier, Mike Tonic voices Carolyn Maxwell, Jim Hill, Doug Isaac people wrappers Lois Siegel, Andrew Nevard musicians Marc Fleury, Richard Perrotte, Florian Richard, Sharon Ryan, Simon Stone, Roger Lemoine rec. studio Jean Sauvageau ltée tech. advisors Bob Presner, Rit Wallis p. assts. Brian Campbell, Peter Budden, Carol Leroux, Sylvia Poirer, Mark Berry, Andrew Nevard, Jacques Bernier, Gylles Corbeil, Nagui Fam, Mike Slobodzin, Cynthia Lealie, Graham Goymour, Robert Brown, Ronnie Lutzer, Robert Lee, Mac Bradden, Tony Altamura, Elias Fessus, Ian MacGillivray, Jean Belcourt, Susan de Rosa, Shozo Ushirogucki, Stephen Reizes, Marten Berkman, Susan Clarkson, Claude Labrecque special recognition Cinema 5, hairstyle by Vincent, Charcuterie Sepps sausages and delicatessen Inc., Reuben's Restaurant Delicatessen Inc., Atlantic Delicatessen ltée, Paquin Gulf-Beau-repair, CTCUM, Multi-Mags-George, Hursan, the O'Keefe Brewery, Le Patrimoine, Beaconsfield Driving School, McDonalds - Harry Berger, Concordia Unifilm, Bell Canada, Jos Pizzeria, Athens Brasserie, Boutique Jacob, Denis Soda, By the Pound Boutique, balloons by Glen Berman, the Kirschners, J.A. van Riel, Mrs. W. van Riel, Mrs. Norman Siegel, Beatrix Traub, p.j.'s - Armand Monroe, Andy Chelminski, Thom Burstyn, Daniel Landau, Dr. Michael Dwor-kind, I. Hausmann, Ben Queenan, Claude Normand, Claude Quillet, Maurice Tremblay, Grace Avriith, GCP Inc. - Ronald Gilbert, Bill Casey, Laura O'Neill, Pat Connor, Roger Tyrrell, Renée van Riel, Robert J. Landry, Adam Symansky, Dr. S. D'Appolonia, Louis-Philippe Hémond, Gary Simms, Tom Robertson, David Wilson, Kevin Tierney, Arlene Sawyer, Dennis Sawyer, Ernie McNabb, Denis Gillson, Laval Fortier, Denis Villeneuve-Giraud, Marie Tonto-Donati belly dance music from the album "The Joy of Belly Dancing" courtesy Monitor Records titles Serge Bouthillier graphics Richard Vincent special thanks to the National Film Board of Canada in memoriam Kenny Berthiaume, Oliver Perry p.c. Chocolate Cake Film Corp. colour 16mm running time: 70 min.

● The image offers small consolation for the technologically effaced in *A 20th Century Chocolate Cake*

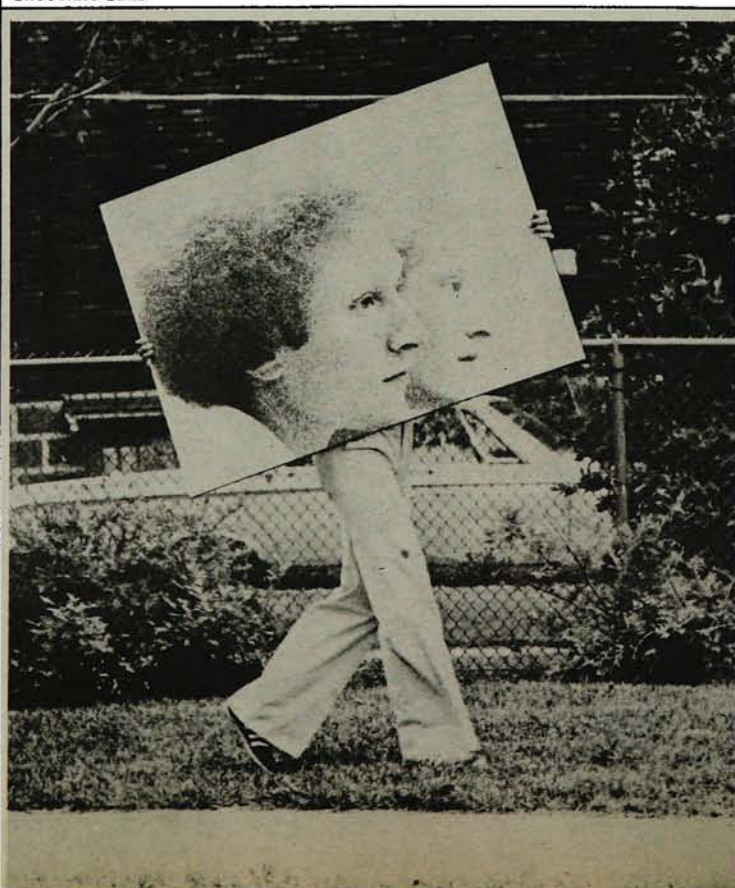


Photo: Lois Siegel



● Beware the swamp-dwelling Barracuda Women in *Spacehunter*

Lamont Johnson's *Spacehunter: Adventures in the Forbidden Zone*

Spacehunter (for short) is such a dispiriting experience that it forced me into happier memories of (generally) more enjoyable cinematic times. The outdoor locations, conjuring up some other planet in future years, looked in their wilderness grandeur much like Monument Valley, Ariz. Probably they were but it took John Ford's eye for composition to make it scenically special. Here, rather like the movie, it is just flat with occasional eruptions. Nature made the Valley that way; assorted Canadians and Americans have made this movie mostly monotonous exposition and, climactically, violent and confusing action.

Another pleasant recollection was that 3-D used to be fun. Be assured that there have been stereoscopic films – even whole features, with stories, around for quite a long time. Columbia's ad campaign for *Spacehunter* calls it the first 3-D film backed by a major studio. They must mean the first since last Tuesday. Actually, Columbia's very own torchbearing lot on Gower Street in old Hollywood produced the earliest of the 1953 wave, *Man in the Dark*, following on the independently-made *B'wana Devil*, which started the protruding balls rolling back then. No doubt, we're expected to have short memories, as well as attention spans, in these enlightened days.

3-D can still be fun. The kids in the audience settled down for some as *Spacehunter* began and I joined them in hope. To be fair, they mostly seemed content at the end but old greybeard knew better. There were some fair effects; even the tendency of 3-D to make human figures look dwarfish was exploited

quite well against the big natural spaces and rocks of the aforesaid Monument Valley. And Peter Strauss and young Molly Ringwald – aided by a few sharp lines in the script – seemed to give it all at least an honest try. TV movie-style. But alas, the wit ran dry, the nasties once introduced proved dreary and the (single) big indoor set was dark and grungy in the extreme.

An outsider cannot speculate on whether Jean Lafleur, who was to have directed from his own co-written story, could have done so adequately, once the originally modest project escalated and 3-D filming was imposed, almost at the last minute. Lafleur, in print, has been very reasonable and not publicly resentful of either Columbia or the chosen replacement, journeyman Lamont Johnson. One hopes he'll live to fight another day. Closing the book on that, then, it can be pointed out that nobody does anything on *Spacehunter* more than adequately and that its achievement – if not its ambition – remains modest indeed.

Clive Denton ●

SPACEHUNTER: ADVENTURES IN THE FORBIDDEN ZONE (in 3D) d. Lamont Johnson p. Don Carmody, John Dunning & Andre Link sc. Edith Rey, David Preston, Dan Goldberg & Len Blum story by Stewart Harding & Jean Lafleur d.o.p. Frank Tidy, B.B.C. p. des. Jackson DeGovia ed. Scott Conrad A.C.E. music Elmer Bernstein sp. makeup efx. Thomas R. Burman cost. des. Julie Weiss p. man. William Zborowsky 1st asst. d. Tony Lucibello 2nd asst. d. Elizabeth Halko, Erika Zborowsky art. d. John R. Jensen, Brent Swift, Michael Nemirsky 3-D consultant Ernest McNabb cam.op. Ron Orioux Cyrus Block 1st cam. asst. Roderick J. Priddy, Tom Fillingham 2nd cam. asst. Douglas Craik, Michael Lund, John Clothier, Curt Petersen, Doug Field loc. sd. rec. Richard Lightstone boom op. Jim Thompson loc. man. Warren Carr sc. sup. Sarah Grahame asst. to Don Carmody Victoria Barney sup. p. auditor Rejane Boudreau const. co-ord. Ken Chang sp. props const. Robert Joyce sp. efx. co-ord. Dale Martin casting Karen Rea p. co-ord. Susan Dukow, Linda Sheehy asst. p. co-ord. Oriana Bielawski, Casey Grant casting asst. Annette Benson p. asst. Rob Cowan, Hank Lawrey, Jim Lansbury, Gwen Spence p. acc't. (Moah) Kay Larlham p. acc't. (Van.) Lorraine Baird asst. ed. David Degeus, George Martin, Don Brochu graphics Lee Cole optical co-ord. Vicky Witt ed. asst. (Van.) Michael Smith, Bruce Giesbrecht post-p. 3-D advisor Martin Jay Sadoff post-p. asst. Ann Couk sp. visual efx. produced by Fantasy II Film Effects art. d. Michael Minor sp. efx. sup. Gene Warren, jr. Peter Kleinow p. sup. Leslie Huntley model shop sup. Dennis Schultz model makers Tom Hucht-

hausen, Will Guest, Kam Cooney, Gary Weeks, Gary Crawford, Mark Joyce, Michael Joyce miniature painter Ronn Gross pyrotechnics Joseph Viskocil cam. op. John Huneck sc. consultant Jerry Pajawa, Bill Strom p. asst. Don Bland, Jane Pahlman, Casey Kilbride, John Grant sp. optical efx. Image 3 optical photo. Phil Huff, Mike Warren lineup Linda Henry matte paintings Matte Effects efx. animation Ernest D. Farino welder foreman Lee Routly metal sculptors Paul Neanover, Richard Gilmore, Stuart Carlisle, Richard Honigman topologist Kim Hix sculptor Bill Isen art dept. asst. Sharon Chang const. foreman Art Wills, Bruce Gfeller stand-by painter Tony Leonardi paint foreman John Tyrell, Dick Girod chief set dec. Carol Lavoie set dec. Linda DeScenna leadmen Rich McElvin, Michael Taylor gaffer John Bartley better boy Stephen Jackson, Jim Hurford key grip Dillard Brinson dolly grip Dave Gordon set up grip Ben Rusi camera car Tom Countryman crane op. Ken Rich ward. Gail Filman hd. hairstylist Tom Booth hairdressers Susan Boyd, Joanne Henderson sp. efx. makeup Steve Laporte, Dale R. Brady, Rob Burman, Sandra Burman, Kathie Clark, Eric Fiedler, Linda Frobos, Kenneth J. Hall, Frederick Luff IV, Marc Tyler hd. makeup artist Del Aceveda makeup artist Cathy Shorkey, Phillis Newman props master Erick Nelson asst. props Dave Newell, Bill Thumm prop buyer Gail Simon prop builders Rebecca Cambruzzi, Sharon Seymour, Doug Ball, Ed Johnson, Wayne Zavosky, Perry McLamb, Trische Miner, Betty Thomas, Frank Parker, Dan Morris sp. efx. Gary Bentley, George Erschbaumer, Darrell Pritchett, Michael Clifford, Keith Richins, Paul Smith, Robert Burns, Steve Luport, Bob Tiller transp. co-ord. Jake Callihoo, John Scott driver cap. Ian Urquhart shipping co-ord. Pablo Paul craftsman Joanne Ryan, Greg Norton add. casting (Van.) Lindsay Walker unit pub. Steve Rubin stills Takashi Seida 2nd. unit cam. John Goode, Larry Dyer, Robert Reed Altman sd. ed. Blue Light Sound Inc. sup. sd. ed. Robert Rutledge, Scott Hecker sd. ed. Lon E. Bender, Wylie Stateman, Bob Newlan, George Anderson, Paul Huntsman sd. processor Craig Harris mus. ed. LA DA sd. re-rec. Les Fresholtz, C.A.S./Arthur Piantadosi, C.A.S./Dick Alexander, C.A.S. motion picture equip. Cinetech, William F. White Ltd. optics Creative Film Arts 3-D main title des. R/Greenberg Assoc., Inc., NYC sd. fac. The Burbank Studios exec. p. Ivan Reitman assoc. p. Stewart Harding p.c. Zone prod. running time 90 min. dist. Columbia Pictures l.p. Peter Strauss, Molly Ringwald, Ernie Hudson, Andrea Marcovici, Michael Ironside, Beeson Carroll, Hrant Alianak, Deborah Pratt, Aleisa Shirley, Call Timmins, Paul Boretzki, Patrick Rowe, Reggie Bennett, stunt co-ord. Walter Scott asst. stunt co-ord. Ben Dobbins hang glider sup. Joe Greblo hang glider pilots Rich Grigsby, Roy Haggard, Chris Price, Christie Greblo stunts Greg Walker, Melvin Jones, Beth Nuffer, George Josef, Jacob Rupp, Tony Morelli, Bill Stewart, Betty Thomas, Mike Adams, Bradley Bovee, Tony Cecere, Danny Costa, John-Clay Scott, Ben R. Scott, Clifford Happy, Jerry Gatlin, Phil Chong, Vince Deadrick sr., Vince Deadrick jr., Keith Wardlow, John Wardlow, Peter Cox, Bill Ferguson, Alex Greene, John Scott, Chere Bryson, Ann Chatterton, Joyce McNeal, Lori Scott.

leave nothing but the grinding, ceaseless awareness of botched artifice.

All In Good Taste more than amply fills the bill. Actors gaze serenely off-camera and recite their *non sequiturs* with a numbness leagues beyond the merely wooden. Something intended as a running gag lurches on screen, sets up its premises, then vanishes utterly. The same apartment is portrayed by two wildly different locations – one of them a town-house. The same reaction shot gets cut in twice before the action occurs, and not once afterwards. Literally dozens of shots are repeated time without number, often in mutually exclusive contexts. Montage sequences break out without reason or direction and crumble to chaos within six shots, victims of their own frantic speed.

It is a level of ineptitude comparable to that in *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, but by itself still not enough to truly plunge a work into the rancid depths of anti-art. For that, says Hoberman, there must also be a certain seriousness of purpose and a deeply zoned personal vision at the helm, if not actually in control of it.

The vision belongs to producer, director, co-writer Anthony Kramreither, whose previous works include *Mondo Strip I and II*. I haven't seen either, but I'm reliably told that he promoted as serious sociology what were, in fact, tacky and inept orgies of tits 'n ass. Their existence makes *All In Good Taste* an unquestionably personal film, for they provide its few shreds of plot and theme and, I suspect, a good deal of its footage. The story concerns a sensitive, talented filmmaker whose inability to get backing for his serious message movie forces him into the clutches of a crass producer who demands that he make a tits 'n ass orgy, promoted as sociology, called *Mondo Strip*, which turns out to be such a critical and financial success that the filmmaker agrees to do a sequel.

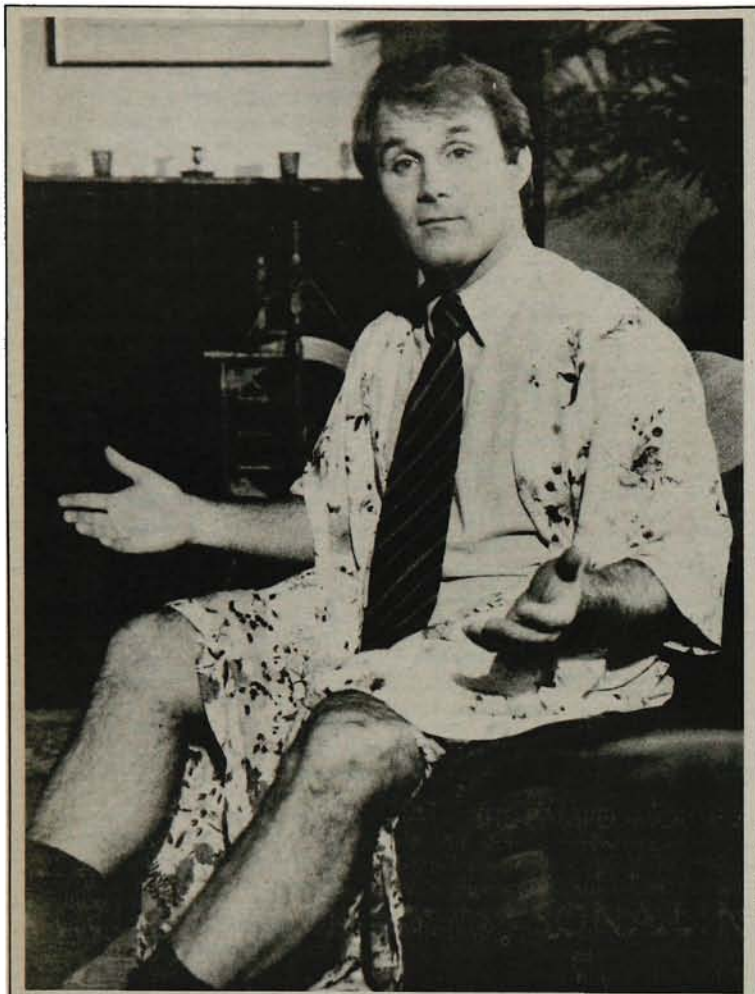
But simple wish-fulfillment (in real life, *Mondo Strip I & II* bombed) and self-justification are not the end of Kramreither's delving into the gummy reaches of his soul. In the final sequence, the filmmaker (Jonathan Welsh) reluctantly agrees to make more sleaze only so the producer will leave him alone to enjoy his private sleaze. It manages, at the same time, to be the ultimate whine of "He made me do it" self-justification and its coldly cynical "I'm doing it to you suckers on purpose" opposite. Given the identity between the two characters, the effect is one of having just watched a particularly small, pallid and repellent scorpion sting itself to death.

Even so, *All In Good Taste* is far from being an anti-masterpiece of the order of *Glen Or Glenda*. It misses on three counts. The first is money: with even less of it, Kramreither would have been deprived of such pros as Harvey Atkin and might then have produced a movie untainted by even brief flashes of competence. Second, his decision to make this a comedy robs us of one of anti-art's legitimate pleasures: laughter. The intentionally funny in anti-art does not transmute to the unintentionally funny, but to the unintentionally unfunny. In the grammar of the cinema, two negatives do not make a positive. Third and most important, Kramreither seems to be totally uninterested in, or perhaps afraid of, his own obsession – naked bodies. They're present at every turn, but their presentation is so perfunctory, so lacking in affect that they fail even as window-dressing. With one significant exception: we see the naked body of the filmmaker, who has just hinted strongly at having

Anthony Kramreither's *All In Good Taste*

If *All in Good Taste* is to be considered at all – a proposition open to serious doubt – then it ought to be given its due and considered from the critical perspective that offers the most opportunity for both elucidation and appreciation. In this case, that can only be the perspective of anti-art.

As J. Hoberman laid down the criteria, anti-art (see *Film Comment* vol. 16, no. 4) begins with the objectively bad film, which, "attempts to reproduce the institutional mode of reproduction, but it's failure to do so deforms the simplest formula and clichés so absolutely that you barely recognize them." Objectively bad films include works by Edward D. Wood, Jr. and Oscar Micheaux, works that relentlessly destroy every illusion they attempt to create, that deconstruct themselves before your very eyes and



● Caught with his pants down is Jonathan Welsh in the tasteless *All in Good Taste*

the ugliest, smallest genitals in the Western world, receding down a confining corridor while female laughter rings cruelly on the soundtrack. It is the closest thing the movie has to an emotional centre and is, I think, the true colour of Kramreither's obsession. He ought to gaze at it more closely; maybe he'll be inspired to do for the human form what Edward D. Wood did for the pink angora sweater.

It's possible these problems will disappear in future works – the money one seems especially likely to get a fast cure – and Tony Kramreither will go on to produce a work that, again in Hoberman's words, "projects a stupidity as fully awesome as genius." If he does, we may be in for a Kramreither cult. If so, a word of warning is in order.

Watching anti-art is not like watching the ordinary bad movie. It has a very real consciousness-distorting power that is not unlike that ascribed by William Burroughs to heroin and that has never been better described than by St. Anselm of Ghent, the 15th-century mystic who wrote of the experience of extended flagellation: "... then did Creation reveal an other face. The wall before mine eye did become as stones apart and unjoined each from the other, though none I knew had moved. And all sound, however sweet before, was now as many voices of men raised in anger in an unknown tongue. Sickened I was, yet not sickened, for this other, cruel, Creation did benumb me with the weight of its horrors and so did protect me from full and destroying apprehension of them. And this other face of Creation did stay before mine eye even after the scourge had ceased its blows for several hours." (*Bryden's*

Lives of the Saints, Oxford University Press, 1958)

Do you really want to do that to yourself?

Andrew Dowler ●

ALL IN GOOD TASTE

p./d. Anthony Kramreither sc. Rick Green. Anthony Kramreither sc. sup. Don Cullen. Roy Wordsworth d.o.p. Dennis Miller p. man. Fraser McAninch assoc. p. & ed. Robert C. Diez d'Aux 1st. asst. d. Robert Appelbe asst. to the p. Shelby Gregory continuity Tannis Baker 2nd asst. d. Fiona Paterson 3rd asst. d./2nd asst. ed. Joel Green p. sec. Janis Diez d'Aux p. acct. Murray Silver make-up Carmen Miller gaffer John Herzog film process Film House sd. Quinn Sound unit publicist Linda Shapiro pr David Novek Assoc. Inc. p.c. Manesco Films Ltd. dist. Pan Canadian running time: 90 min. colour 35mm l.p. Jonathan Welsh, Jo-Anne Clark, Harvey Atkin, James B. Douglas, Linda Renhoffer, Patti Oatman, Jack Anthony, Don Cullen, Nancy Kerr, Gary David, Rummy Bishop, Kathy Michael McGlynn, Mary Pirie, Cathy Gallant, John Kozak, John Davies, Stan Lesk, Richard Ayres, Carl Albertson, Rebecca Lynn Novak, Matsu Anderson, Charlotte Andrew, Big Lou Pitoscia, Kathy Morin, Gina Vottero.

Stuart Cooper's The Disappearance

Nearly six years after it was originally to have been released, Garth Drabinsky's first production, *The Disappearance*, finally made it onto Canadian screens and almost simultaneously went to pay-TV. When a film has been that long on the shelf, the natural reaction, given the recent history of Canadian cinema, is to

suspect a work of dubious merit. However, when compared to some of the "lost" films made in 1979-1980, this 1977 production is not without interest, though it must, in all honesty, be called a failure.

Two notable cinema stylists loom large in the background of this picture. The dark narrative, fractured by numerous flashbacks, calls to mind the work of Nicolas Roeg, and not without reason. In addition to the presence of Donald Sutherland in the lead role – he appeared in Roeg's *Don't Look Now* – the script is by Paul Mayersberg, who also wrote for Roeg *The Man Who Fell To Earth*.

Similarly, John Alcott's photography, aided by Anne Pritchard's production design, clearly suggests the work he has done for Stanley Kubrick. The Canadian sections of the film, shot in and around Habitat and Man and His World in Montreal during the winter, show the influence of *A Clockwork Orange* in its functional, sterile settings. The British segment, meanwhile, with its setpiece in a converted Elizabethan coach house and an adjoining greenhouse, has some of the lushness and decadence (though not the dim smoky lighting) of *Barry Lyndon*.

There is, however, something clearly wrong in what purports to be a thriller if these technical matters are the best aspects of the film. To be sure, director Stuart Cooper does not go as far as the British commercial directors – such as Alan Parker, Ridley Scott, Adrian Lyne and Hugh Hudson, who have tended to subordinate plot almost totally to technique, but *The Disappearance* is clearly heading that way. For it is the story, and the inability of the filmmakers to convincingly execute it, that has kept the film in storage for so long.

Donald Sutherland plays Jay Mallory, a professional assassin, whose employers (the "Office") use an international advertising agency as a front. Mallory has been resisting a new assignment, because he is trying to find what has become of his Québécoise wife Celandine (Francine Racette), who has suddenly disappeared. He eventually accepts the assignment, but only so that he can go to England to confront Roland Deverell (Christopher Plummer), for whom he suspects Celan-

dine has left him. From his contact Atkinson (John Hurt), he discovers that Deverell is also his target, but because of his personal involvement finds himself reluctant to complete the contract.

The problem with the film lies here. While the hit man is a staple of the macho side of mystery fiction, he has not been too successful as a film protagonist, as such action heavyweights as Clint Eastwood (*The Eiger Sanction*) and Charles Bronson (*The Mechanic*) have found out. Donald Sutherland plays Mallory so coldly that there is no chance that the audience can find any sympathy with him. He is not a big enough name in the marketplace that the film could be piggy-backed on a more popular or sympathetic performance such as *Ordinary People* or *Threshold*, as both the American and Canadian distributors attempted. The only noteworthy aspect of the role is that, in retrospect, Sutherland's performance becomes a dry run for his role in *Eye of the Needle*, right down to the tweed suit, mustache and haircut.

The alternative to concentrating on Mallory's character would have been to treat the film in terms of the violent but passionate relationship between Mallory and Celandine, as seen through the Roegian flashbacks. But Francine Racette, in spite of her personal relationship with Donald Sutherland, is just inadequate for the role, which ends up as an amalgam of the worst aspects of Carole Laure and Geneviève Bujold. Moreover, in re-editing the film, Fima Noveck, who already had shown in his work on *Suzanne* and *Circle of Two* that he prefers simple plotting, has cut the flashbacks to such a degree that they have little impact and give none of the psychological insights into the characters that is the *raison d'être* for the device in the first place. All the secondary characters, most notably co-producer David Hemmings as Celandine's first husband, are reduced to little more than walk-ons.

The failure of *The Disappearance* taught Garth Drabinsky some lessons, so that when he made *The Silent Partner* he was in a position to ensure distribution through his own company. By the time he made *The Changeling*, he had



● No sympathy for the hit-man: Donald Sutherland and real-life wife in *The Disappearance*

his own theatres as well. But, in spite of his entrepreneurial skills, none of his films have been able to reconcile commercial and artistic aspirations. Like *The Disappearance* and more than a few other Canadian films, the full potential remains untapped.

J. Paul Costabile ●

THE DISAPPEARANCE d. Stuart Cooper p. David Hemmings (U.K.), Gerry Arbeid (Canada) exec. p. Garth H. Drabinsky, James Mitchell (Canada) p. exec. Gavrick Losey (U.K.) asst. d. Terry Marcel, David Wimbury, Ian Whyte (U.K.), Tony Thatcher, Ken Goch, John Caradonna (Canada) sc. Paul Mayersberg, from the novel *Echoes of Celadine* by Derek Marlowe cost. Monique Champagne d.o.p. John Alcott cam. op. James Devis add. photog. Monianne sd. camera Bill Baringer ed. Eric Boyd-Perkins (original version), Fima Noveck (revised version) creative consultants Niko Elmaleh, Mel Maron sd. rec. Robin Gregory boom Norman Mercier, Terry Sherratt sd. ed. Alain Beil sd. ef. ed. Chris Greenham re-rec. Gerry Humphreys music Robert Farnon (original version) Craig Hundley (revised version) p. des. Anne Pritchard art d. Glenn Bydwell, Brian Thomas p. man. Garth Thomas (U.K.) Bob Presner (Canada) loc. man. Richard Green (U.K.) Duane Howard (Canada) key grips Tony Gundrie, John Daust visual ef. Dick Hewitt, Alan Whibley firearms handler Joe Elsner cost. Milena Canonero ward. Tom Dickinson makeup Anthony Clavet titles Trevor Bond p. asst. Sally Shewring (U.K.), Carlos Ferrand, Jon Goodwill, Terry Last, Josh Nevsky, Bill Smith (Canada) p.c. Trofar (London), Tiberius Film Productions (Montreal) 1977. Color Eastmancolor, 35 mm. running time 102 minutes (original version) 84 minutes (revised version) dist. Pan-Canadian I.p. Donald Sutherland, Francine Racette, David Hemmings, John Hurt, David Warner, Christopher Plummer, Virginia McKenna, Peter Bowles, Michelle Magry, Duane Howard, Christina Greatrex, Robin Sachs, Maureen Beck, Norman Ensley, Patricia Hodge, Mark Cogman, Robert Korne, Dick Irwin, Danny Gallivan.

Atom Egoyan's *Open House*

Combining linear narrative plotting with experimental filmmaking techniques is a dangerous game. Like walking on a greased tightrope, at any moment you may slip off. Atom Egoyan's short film *Open House* is on that tightrope, and the only reason it does not fall into the abyss is due solely to Egoyan's maturing as a filmmaker.

The tightrope almost gets the better of Egoyan on many occasions, but his combination of linearity with experimentalism is logical for the story he wishes to tell. His use of highly stylized camera movement is *bona fide* experimental cinema, but Egoyan uses it very effectively to give the audience some much-needed information.

The story he tells is paper thin, and

like Egoyan's most recent 16 mm shorts (the badly flawed *After Grad With Dad* and the obscure *Peepshow*), the unspoken, unseen motivations of his characters are everything. Frank (Ross Fraser), a seemingly incompetent real estate agent, is taking a young married couple (Michael and Maureen, played by Michael Marshall and Sharon Cavanaugh) to see a dilapidated home in downtown Toronto. It is obvious from the beginning that Frank is not going to sell the house, and at the end he does not.

This slight story is not what concerns Egoyan. He uses this framework to drape a cast of characters who not only cannot communicate with one another, but there is aggression and hostility hidden just below the surface of each conversation. Open hostility is revealed only once when a man (played by Bruce Bell in a funny/scary cameo) chastises Frank for almost running him over. "You know why you're a stranger?" the man yells through Frank's car window. "It's because you're strange."

A theme Egoyan has used ineffectually before, but is picked up ingeniously in *Open House*, is subjective reality. Subjective reality fascinates Egoyan and it forms the core for this film. The young couple, when apart, spin different tales of what each other does for a living; Frank hides under a half dozen facades; and the owners of the house are convinced their home used to be a castle. The audience is never told what is real and what is imagined reality. That is the beauty and the flaw of *Open House*.

In his attempt to be subtle Egoyan almost loses his audience. In fact, at the critical moment he will lose an inattentive audience. The justification for Frank's peculiar behaviour and incompetence is on the screen, but if you are not paying attention you will miss it. Being too obscure is as inexcusable as being too obvious. At times *Open House* is too obscure.

Atom Egoyan has learned much in the last three years. With each successive film he demonstrates a firmer understanding of the filmmaking process and to what limits he can push it. Thus, even with its flaws, *Open House* is a smooth and logical progression that leads to his next and more ambitious film.

David Churchill ●

OPEN HOUSE p./d./sc. Atom Egoyan d.o.p. Peter Mettler ed. Atom Egoyan sd. David Rokeby sd. rec. Michael Ruehle asst. cam. Bruce McDonald gaffer/grip Aidan Cosgrave crane op. Bill Heintz stills Philip Newton p. asst. Shelley Tepperman, Mark Bartley, David Fraser l.p. Ross Fraser, Michael Marshall, Sharon Cavanaugh, Alberta Davidson, Hovsep Yeghoyan, Bruce Bell. p.c. Ego Film Arts with the assistance of the OAC. running time: 27 min. colour, 16mm dist.



Photo: Ecology House

● Building the Trombe wall was a major challenge in this informative film

Barbara Sweete's *Old House / New House*

Over a period of two years, eighty Pollution Probe Volunteers transformed a drafty, but attractive Victorian house in downtown Toronto into a model of energy-efficient and ecologically-sound living space. The result, *Ecology House*, is a popular energy conservation showcase which attracts close to 1,000 visitors each month. This film, *Old House/New House*, documents the transformation step-by-step. We see a 90-year-old rooming-house gradually become a working demonstration of conserver living, with a heating bill reduced by 85 per cent.

The film is informative and straightforward, following the volunteers at work and explaining how each change to the house will be effective. We see various methods for reducing air leakage in the home, for installing insulation, and for making use of passive and active solar technology. By filming the inexperienced volunteers at work, *Old House/New House* shows that "retrofitting" (thermal upgrading) can be done by almost anyone. This in itself makes a viewing of the film a valuable experience. Techniques like weatherstripping, caulking, installing insulation, and the making of thermal shutters are "demystified" and shown to be easily done.

Other retrofitting procedures are more challenging and cause some interesting moments of tension in the film. The building of the large Trombe wall - a

1300 square-foot glass and wood frame that covers the south-facing wall of the building - is a major construction job that challenges the volunteers. We see the necessity for smooth cooperation and patience in the erection of this massive solar collector. The fitting in of the third-floor greenhouse cover, a heavy glass frame hoisted by several workers, is another slightly anxious moment in the film where a mistake could mean the ruin of much work. As the cover slides into place, there is a palpable sense of victory in the film. Such moments are nicely placed to personalize the material and involve us in the project.

Old House/New House also gives the viewer practical information on waste recycling, gardening and hydroponics. In fact, this is a very informative film - more than just a record of one retrofitting project, it tries to convey to the viewer as much information as one might get by visiting Ecology House itself. Thus, the film is useful for any group interested in public education and urban conservation issues. A French version, *La Maison Écologique*, is also available. *Old House/New House* was a Red Ribbon Winner at the American Film Festival in 1982. Like Ecology House itself, the film is "a starting-off point for thinking about the way we live."

Joyce Nelson ●

OLD HOUSE/NEW HOUSE p. David Springbett, Larry Weinstein d. Barbara Sweete sc. John Bemrose cam. Richard Stringer ed. Niv Fichman sd. Danilla Fingstein re-rec. George Novotny mus. Jim Montgomery narr. Don Franks 16mm., colour, 28 minutes. 1981. p.c. Energy Media Associates Available from: NFB, or Ecology House, 12 Madison Ave., Toronto, Ont. (416) 967-0577.

● Strange strangers: Michael Marshall and Sharon Cavanaugh in *Open House*



Photo: Philip Newton