

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 Inoui, 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 Crimmon, 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, Joe 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 Symanaky, 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