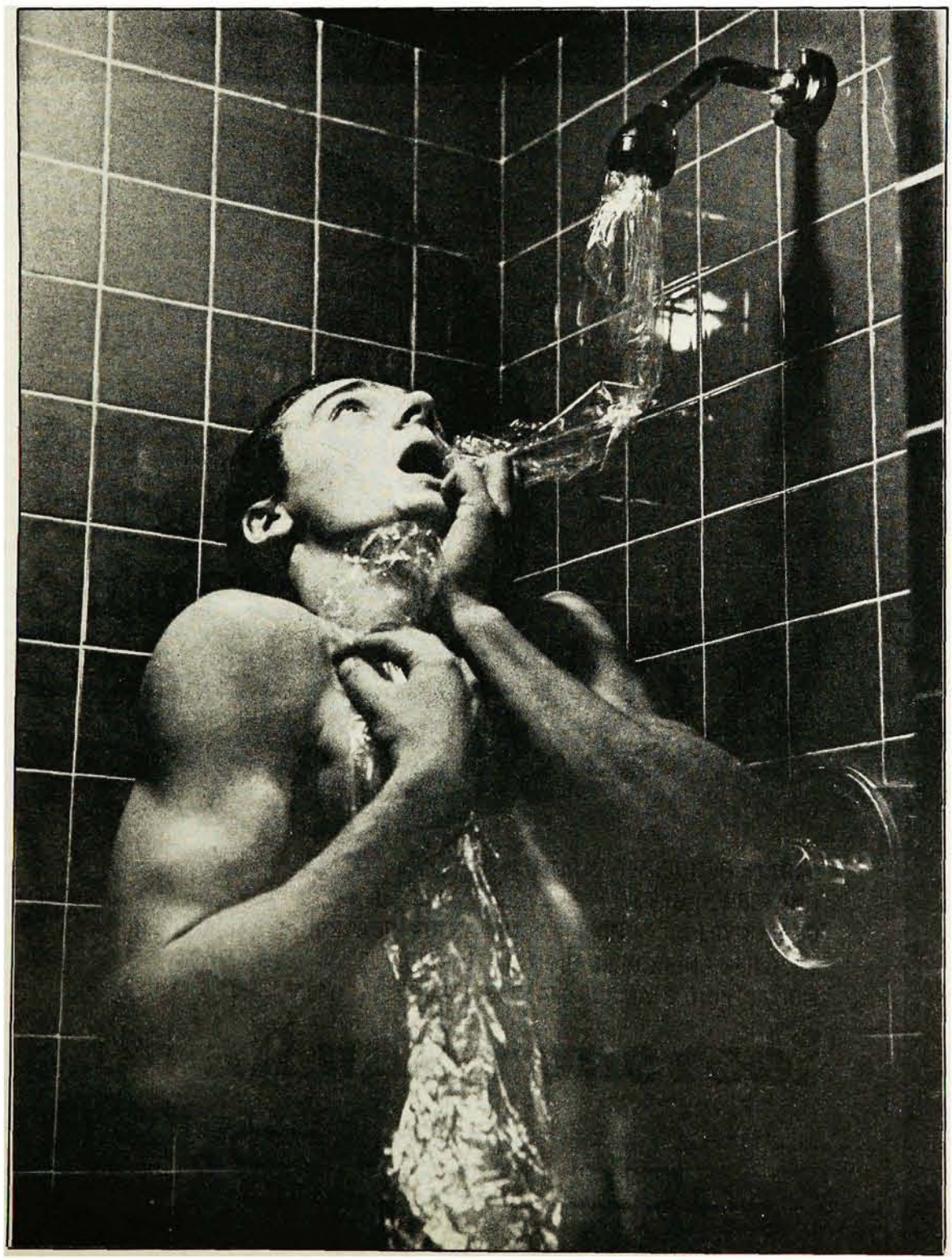
Prairie postmodern:

An introduction to the mind & films of John Paizs



by Geoff Pevere

In one of the few legitimately seminal essays on English Canadian movies, Robert Fothergill posited a Younger Brother Syndrome as the principal defining characteristic of protagonists in our feature films.[1] Psychologically speaking, Fothergill argued, Anglo-Canadian protagonists suffer from a chronic collective inferiority complex caused by the intimidating, pervasive and ultimately emasculating presence of that great, perfect and powerful sibling to the south, who runs faster, plays harder, earns more money and lives longer than we Younger Brothers do. How we envy him, and how we dream to be more like him, but oh how this wanking exercise in vicarious fulfillment retards our heroic potential. Wanting so much to be like Older Brother, to share his reflected glory rather than squatting in his shadow, we dream of his sublime and confident perfection only to be crippled by the daybreak collision between our nocturnal desires and the hard waking realization of our profound wimpishness. In movie terms, this means a legacy of drearily parading Petes and Joeys goin' down the road to certain oblivion. In other words, 'heroes' for whom losing is a defining characteristic.

In the films directed, written and shot by Winnipeg's John Paizs, the protagonists may have the Younger Brother Syndrome, but they do not suffer from it. Usually, in fact, they feel nothing at all. Not that they've evaded the psychological process of cultural molestation and public humiliation mapped by Fothergill, they've just absorbed it on some painless, preconscious, photosynthetic level, as a plant takes in sunlight. If they were more inward or existentially bent they might remark, as Rudy Vogler does in Wim Wenders' *Kings of the Road,* that "the Yanks have even colonized our subconscious." But then again, if they said that or something like it, they wouldn't be what they are: oblivious regurgitators of junk media *Americana,* semicomatose casualties of a cathode-coddled generation. It is this very obliviousness to their condition *as a condition,* this unflappable deadpan spaciness, in fact, that both distinguishes Paizs' protagonists from the anguished sufferers of the Younger Brother Syndrome and yet firmly diagnoses them as perfectly logical, if radical, extensions of Fothergill's pantheon of dreary dreamers.

A former animator who has completed four half-hour shorts (each – aptly – the length of a typical sitcom) and a soon-to-be-released feature titled *Crime Wave,*

Geoff Pevere teaches film at Carleton University and manages the National Film Theatre in Ottawa.

Paizs is both a regurgitator and an ironic commentator on the phenomenon of subconscious infiltration by an alien ideology that has functionally made cultural schizophrenics of a generation of TV-toasted Anglo-Canadians who shovel their snowy driveways while yearning for the blue beam of boxed oblivion. At 26, Paizs is precisely of an age that took all its childhood development cues, as well as absorbing its ideological frame of reference, from American TV, pop music, comic books and movies. That is, not only did Captain Kangaroo and Jethro Bodeen teach us rec-room rodents to speak and read, they gave us an ideological framework to boot. That this framework was at odds with our daily experiences as Canadian kids learning of Laurier and listening to Lester B. mattered little to our distracted minds : we were unreachable, bewitched and lost in space, dreaming of Jeannie deep in the Twilight Zone. Besides, whatever nationalistic irrelevancies we'd been subjected to during the day were simply and sensually stroked away in the early evening by a warm dip into the inviting, opaque glow of throbbing TV signals.

While John Paizs and I never met during the crucial, formative period of irreparable ideological corruption, I am sure we were participating in the same collective ritual of willful subconscious self-abuse ; he in that isolated prairie stronghold of Manitoban middle-classness, Winnipeg, and I in various and virtually interchangeable suburban developments skirting Ottawa, London and St. Catharines (and, once, for a year, Chicago : I think it telling that I did not notice the difference). Separated ethnically, economically and geographically, Paizs and I nevertheless share the same deep, primal and powerful demon (something with Ed Sullivan's face, Mr. Spock's ears, Lucy Ball's hair, James Bond's dinner jacket and Fred Flintstone's feet), a possession of the collective psyche that transcends region, class and politics to bind us – a million peers – into passive, pie-eyed potatoes, snugly rooted in the polyester plush pillows of the same couch.

That, I suppose, is why Paizs' films hit me like the proverbial bolt. Shown in the context of the Perspective Canada series at last fall's Festival of Festivals – and unfortunately banished to the eleven p.m. ghetto slot, thus effectively minimizing the possibility of any potentially sizable audience – Paizs' ***The Obsession of Billy Botski*** (1980), ***Spring-time in Greenland*** (1981) and ***The International Style*** (1983) constituted a striking introduction to an altogether original ***oeuvre*** (the remaining short film, ***Oak, Ivy and Other Dead Elms*** [1982], was not shown in Toronto). But the response of the audience that was present was accordingly enthusiastic. The reason for the instantaneous rapport between the films and this or any similar audience was, of course, the shared raw inspirational material that lends the films both their structure and (in varying degrees between them) their thematic substance. Paizs' decidedly skewered (yet meticulously balanced and internally logical) cinematic universe is comprised of the residual forms and dramatic conventions of '50s and '60s ***kitsch Americana ;*** primarily TV, movies and pop music. But more than merely documenting the media matter of a bygone era with a backward peek through rose or dun-coloured glasses – as ***American Graffiti*** and ***Animal House*** respectively do – Paizs' films, with frequently deadpan accuracy, adopt the modes of '60s media kitsch, from the ***My Three Sons***-like opening graphics, to Gerry Klym's mechanical reaction-shot editing. The result is a veritable semiological catalogue-in-action of the sign-systems of '60s pop media. The striking intelligence and singularity of the films is thus in the revelatory way they reveal these sign-systems ***as*** sign-systems. In painstakingly reproducing the forms as well as the thematic concerns of '60s pop narratives, Paizs effectively demonstrates – in practice – the Barthesian dictum that forms of cultural mythology only become apparent and artificial once enough time has elapsed to allow them to fall out of practical usage and be replaced by others. Like the old system of cultural codes, which now seems obvious or campy, the new one will be invisible and seemingly natural – for the time being at least : ***Hill Street Blues*** will be every bit as kitschy 20 years from now as ***Dragnet*** seems today.

Paizs' films thus go beyond the realm of reactionary nostalgia to a kind of radical exposure of the operations of pop-culture systems in general, and specifically the relation between a particular system and the attitudes and ideological framework it helps shape and support. ***Beam me up, indeed, Mr. Spock :*** how can I ever watch ***Star Trek*** the same way again ?

Jargon-juggling and syllable-slinging notwithstanding, this is not to posit Paizs as a kind of prairie Godard, coldly deconstructing signifying systems with films so didactically chunky you could eat them with a fork. Indeed, what is most immediately appealing and apprehensible in the films, what tickles the viscera long before the brain can set the appropriate analytical and terminological snares, is their humour and simplicity. Moreover, it is precisely this funny and unfettered nature that ultimately facilitates the degree of intellectual resonance and political relevance the films unquestionably possess. For if they address and confront the modes of dominant junk media in any effective way, it is because they do so in the language spoken by that media. Rather as though Ed Sullivan were to hold forth on his own show – between dancing bears and talking mice – on the form and function of the TV variety program in popular culture.

If this plundering of prefabricated forms is the predominant postmodern pursuit (and Paizs is as postmodern as Yogi Bear is hungry) so be it, but the commanding and distinguishing characteristic of the films is the alacrity with which they adopt these second-hand forms in a manner that is at once reflexive, logical, satirical and patently non-didactic – the form of the concept always takes precedence over its educational function. But not all at once : what is equally notable is the gradual closing-in on object by subject the films indicate, until, in ***The International Style,*** the two are virtually indistinguishable. In ***Billy Botski,*** for example, the protagonist (here, as always, played by Paizs) is somnambulistically driven on a quest for an idealized, archetypal, '60s sexual ideal (eponymously named Connie), as a fantasy antidote to an otherwise drab and frozen suburban existence. Four films later, the protagonist's escape into media fantasyland is a ***fait accompli*** – there is not even any trace of a 'normal', non-conventionalized world against which to distinguish fantasy from fantasizer. By the time Billy has evolved into ***The International Style***'s Nick, he is completely immersed in a ***Twilight Zone***-like universe made up entirely of the forms and conventions of regurgitated pop media. What Billy so desperately sought, in other words, has swallowed Nick. Somewhere, Rod Serling and Roland Barthes must be snickering.

But the absorption of the Paizs protagonist into a completely conventionalized kitsch universe, with little visible irony and no alternative reference outside of itself, is a transitional one, occurring gradually over four films. As Paizs the character slowly acquires more assurance, and finally, in ***The International Style,*** even a kind of heroic self-determination (Nick is a 007-styled cat burglar, oddly corpse-like but irrefutably a hero, who foils the villains and even marries the girl), so Paizs the filmmaker progresses in his gradual merging of Billy Botski's two opposing worlds : what is introduced in the first film as ethereal, idealized and unattainable is by the fourth a condition of the fictional universe, as though Billy has been sucked into his own TV set and now lives according to its universal laws, replete with characteristic modes of editing, colour-tinting and muzakal accompaniment.

The Obsession of Billy Botski is concerned with the radical alienation of its protagonist, Billy, from the freeze-dried suburban desolation of winter-locked Winnipeg. Living with his nostalgia-numbed sot of an uncle (who fades into alcoholic stupors while seated next to a ceramic collie), Billy seeks refuge from the numbing, frost-bitten dullness of his life in the comforting cultural residue of a spent decade. Dressed (in thin tie, stovepipe, brogues and overcoat) like an alien emissary from the planet Perry Mason, Billy is enthralled with the modes and manners of the pre-crisis '60s ; those few idyllic years prior to Dallas, Vietnam and Nixon when movies, magazines and TV (for Billy and I, TV in particular) collectively transmitted a popsicle-tinted image of an idealized wonderbread world, where women's smiles sparkled beneath beehive bouffants ; when baseball-capped kids with freckles soaked up frosties, shreddies, krispies and wheaties ; and firm-but-fair dads patiently counselled domestic infractions while attired in the requisite uniform of benign paternal authority : cardigan, pipe, slippers and newspaper. In particular, Billy is beholden to the peculiar '60s image of the pre-feminist feminine sexual ideal : the hair-helmeted, watusi-twisting, mini-skirted, blue-eyed beach bunny from next door. Idealized and personified by Billy in the form of Connie the archetypally named fantasy ideal, ***The Obsession of Billy Botski*** chronicles the headlong confrontation of the hero with the ***Laura***-like manifestation of his deepest desires at a kitsch and cocktail party he's crashed. The dream is punctured, however, when (at the climactic point of an artfully stylized and painstakingly postured '60s seduction ritual at the Pink Flamingo Motel) Connie collapses (or perhaps deflates) in Billy's eager arms. After disposing of the body in a frozen lake, Billy's voice-over informs us that the experience has purged him of his obsession, and he wistfully notes that there are definite signs of spring in the pure prairie air.

Spring eventually arrives, with a vengeance, in the first of the 'Three Worlds of Nick' trilogy, ***Springtime in Greenland,*** made a year after ***Billy Botski.*** Certain stylistic and thematic traits introduced in the first film are worth noting immediately however, as they have a direct bearing on the discernible process of development in the following films. First, Gerry Klym's minimal and abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies every crunching footstep and crackling match to economically suggest the extent of Billy's subjective breach with his surroundings. These are the sounds of the existentially self-absorbed, as heard by inward-turned ears. Billy is also an early showcase for Paizs' alacrity at the virtual reconstruction of the characteristic modes of extinct forms of popular media. This pertains not only to the deadpan hokum of the dialogue and acting, and crease-perfect precision of the trousers, but more subtly and strikingly to the TV-perfect, mechanical style of editing and shooting, which never (well, rarely) strays from the repressive, near-anal, shot-reaction-shot format familiar to any late-night retro-viewers' experience of ***The Beverly Hillbillies*** or ***The Twilight Zone.*** Equal to this carefully self-conscious visual mimickry are the original scores of John McCullouch, which evoke – note for sprightly note – the banal but indelible themes of literally scores of old sitcoms and 45's.

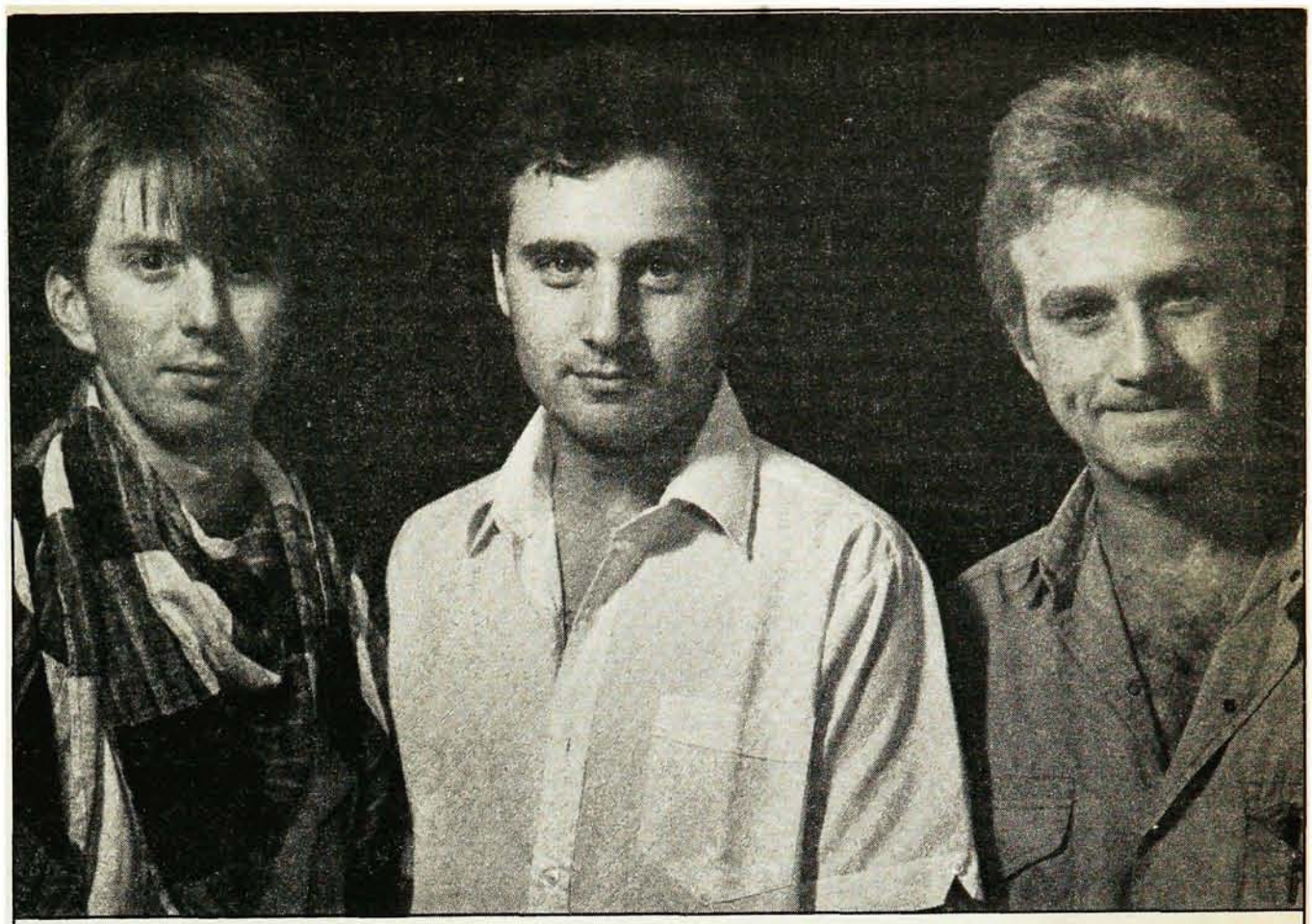
What marks ***Billy Botski*** as the first of a developing cycle of thematically and stylistically evolving group of films is the separation and distinction drawn between the obsessed protagonist and the object of his obsession. What distinguishes Billy, finally, from the Nicks of the subsequent cycle is the acknowledgement, made by Billy and the form of the films themselves, that this is indeed an obsession or fantasy projection, separate from and irreconcilable with the hard, cold facts of a Winnipeg winter's dismal reality. Like the movie-mythical Laura of Preminger's film she evokes, Connie is as much the unattainable dream or masturbatory ideal of a self-absorbed eccentric as an actual living doll. And it is precisely this recognition of the distinction between fantasy ideal and snow-smothered reality that finally frees Nick from his obsession in the end. Increasingly, as we shall see, the fantasy realm takes precedence in Paizs' films, to the extent where no comfortable separation of obsession from obsessed can be delineated, until, that is, the films will suggest a funny-frightening realm where a media-monitored time warp has trapped the characters – and perhaps the filmmaker – in the Beckett-inspired black hole of an eternally unfolding late afternoon rerun of ***Gilligan's Island.***

Those signs of spring wistfully anticipated by Billy Botski come with technicolour severity in ***Springtime in Greenland*** (subtitled 'Nick at Home'), but they bring no relief for the terminally despondent protagonist (still played with endearing, pop-eyed vacancy by Paizs). A decidedly transitional film in terms of its shifting formal and conceptual concerns, ***Springtime in Greenland***'s lack of overall cohesion actually marks it as Paizs' most purely entertaining film (I laughed until it hurt), demonstrating as it does not only the range of Paizs' parodic abilities and crap-cult influences, but simply how funny he can be too. While the seemingly central story concerns (ostensibly) a barnyard rooster ritual carried out around a backyard swimming-pool on the occasion of the annual Hello Springtime barbecue, the film is regularly punctuated by stylistically distinct sequences, each uncannily echoing a long extinct but subconsciously stored form of pop media. Set to a score of chirping birds and singing strings, ***Springtime in Grenland*** opens

with a mock *Disney's True Life Adventure* voice-over which introduces us to the denizens and rituals of 'Greenland,' a kind of ultimate suburban paradise – or hell – where profound contentment and inner well-being is suggested by shots of people washing cars, mowing lawns, filling pools and readying supper ("Mom shows Sis the proper way to prepare a hamburger for the barbecue. Whoops! Be careful Sis..."). The stage thus set by this marvellously deadpan exposition, it's time to meet the principal combatants: Nick, disaffected, bored and atheistic in his disregard for the sanctity of suburban ritual; and Corny Blower, the arrogant show-off jock whose blaring antics are usually greeted with a rousing chorus of "That son of a gun!" Challenged to a diving duel by the meathead, Nick risks public humiliation and defeat by reluctantly agreeing to meet his perma-tanned nemesis on his own terms. Woven through this archly suburban variation of the male tribal supremacy ritual are passages that, while diverging from the central storyline in terms of linearity, effectively provide a kind of pop-ideology context for the absurd middle-class melodrama being played out around the sun-baked backyard barbecue. The preparation of the soon-to-be sizzled feast, for example, is rendered as a kind of yum-yum, Kraft-sponsored cooking documentary that might have been shown – with perfect appropriateness – to either a high school home ec class or between the third and fourth features at an all-night drive-in. Similarly, in a sequence that echoes the blinkered, what-me-worry complacency of middle-class propaganda of the '50s (and which was eerily intoned by the anti-nuke compilation *The Atomic Cafe*), we are taken on a tour of the home of the future, replete with smiling hostesses, a hard-sell voice-over, and close-up demonstrations of such vital domestic appliances as kitchen garburetors and dining-room dimmer switches.

It is precisely this episodic structure that enriches *Springtime in Greenland* both in terms of raw entertainment value and conceptual complexity. A dialectic of sorts is established between the expository mock-documentary passages and the poolside showdown that effectively suggests a cause-and-effect relationship between them: mindless media messages make for mindless behaviour. What marks the film as a transition-point between *Billy Botski* and the following films in the Nick cycle is the preservation of an observable distinction between the world of the drama and the world perpetrated in and by the media. True, Nick's parents' home is likely modelled on what is displayed: the 'Dream Home' of the mockumentary sequence, but the distinction between the media and its effects is ultimately preserved. Both Billy and *Springtime*'s Nick can be understood and evaluated in terms of the pop-culture icons and message-systems they are contrasted with and distinguishable from. In the next two films, no such distinction is possible. Nick returns in each, but in both he is so totally submerged in regurgitated narrative patterns of past forms of pop media, he is no longer distinct as either a product or a condition of those patterns and forms – he has, as we shall see, fulfilled Billy Botski's deepest longings and actually become part of them: just another resurrected convention.

Oak, Ivy and Other Dead Elms and ***The International Style***, the remaining parts of the 'Three Worlds of Nick' cycle,



● Terrific trio: Tom Fijal, left, director John Paizs, and soundman/editor Gerry Klym

might best be described as genre pieces – if their generic antecedents weren't so obscure and wildly condensed, that is. The first (subtitled 'Nick Learns Something') is a rah-rah paean to the character-building virtues of a good, old-fashioned, ivy-league education. It is, however, anything but straight in its endorsement of dusty Archie and Jughead values: by pitting a team of toothsome, tartan-vested, by-golly preppies against a sinisterly ethnic enclave of artsy campus liberals (who want, among other things, to turn the preppies' cherished alumni club into a rape crisis centre), Paizs ironically pulls the value system of *Animal House* and its pseudo-anarchic ilk inside out. If the film sides with the tweedy neocon throwbacks, it's more a matter of style than genuine political endorsement. With their archly mawkish banter and slap-on-the-shoulders male-bonding behaviour, Nick's buttoned-down buddies suggest some strange creatures unleashed from a Pat Boone movie or a forgotten episode of *The Loves of Dobie Gillis* ("Topsiders From Hell"?). That the virtually mute Nick pledges allegiance to these chauvinist zombies virtually upon arrival at school is thus more a matter of fantasy fulfillment than heartfelt support: in their stereotypical manner and matter, they are to Nick what Connie was to Billy: emblematic icons of a simpler time, when style, not substance, was all that mattered. So why complicate the image with issues?

With ***Oak, Ivy and Other Dead Elms***, ***The International Style*** shares a formal grasp of such imitative precision, they both seem as much of as about the respective sub-genres they resurrect. ***Dead Elms*** is shot in a low contrast, diffused black-and-white that lends a nostalgic, autumnal softness to the B-movie, essentials-only editing and the geometrically-composed, no-nonsense ***mise en scène***. When the film diverts from this '50s meat-and-potatoes formality, it is to interject a flashback passage of haunting accuracy in its evocation of dozens of '50s alien-invader, cold-war paranoia films. ***The International Style*** (subtitle: Nick Finds Love) has no such interruptions in its fastidious formal fidelity to the conventions – albeit in an absurdist and surreal manner – of the typical '60s superspy movie or TV program. Here the distinction between the mode of pop cult satirized and the manner of satirization is impossible to make. Were it not for the media-melting pot juxtapositions that place killer cowboys alongside brylcreemed gangsters and Frankenstein-like henchmen in the same narrative space, the uninitiated viewer might feel he's stumbled upon an exhumed episode of ***Batman*** or ***The Man From U.N.C.L.E.***: supervillains match wits and hurl accented epitaphs at superthief Nick, who like them is vying for the hidden treasures of the cut-rate B-movie Xanadu of a pleasure dome known as Starland, which is despotically run by a slick-scalped gangster playboy. Packed with judo fights, pointy boots and twanging 007-esque guitar motifs, ***The International Style*** represents the logical ***dénouement*** to this evolving cycle of films by a promising prairie postmodern. The film ends, in a way, in precisely the place Billy Botski dreamed of being: in a universe totally governed by the dictates and skewered logic of pop convention, where citizens are guaranteed a beginning, a middle and an end to their own stories. If not in that order. With ***The International Style***, Paizs evokes a universe totally determined by the cultural conditions of its making, and in doing so has effectively made from a lifetime diet of junk culture consumption a fruitful recycling of that same crap so that, by slight and deft rearrangement of familiar elements, we may see not only how that crap worked, but exactly how it worked on us. This, one supposes, is what re-cycling is all about: making garbage useful.

That's just one reason why Paizs is worth paying attention to. He speaks to that vast generation of culturally polluted schizophrenic Canadians who grew up with their feet in the slush and their eyes on Beverly Hills, for whom television was a persistently seductive, and ultimately masochistic, vision of what we wished for but could never attain: to be just like our Older brother. It is this institutionalized position as the lesser sibling, peripheral voyeur and perpetual window-shopper at the pop-culture marketplace, that informs these films and lends them a potential for truly relevant rapport among Canadians that is frankly unique among our filmmakers of his generation. As to their Canuckness, I'd argue they couldn't be more ours, in spite (or because) of their predatory fascination with modes of popular American media. By subtly re-arranging the elements and iconographic roadsigns of American movies and TV shows, Paizs establishes a distinct critical distance between the films and the object of their mimickry. It is this distanced perspective that permits the films to mock and analyse the values and assumptions of those entertainment forms that once seemed so cozily familiar, even to us who watched from a distance created not only by geography but by politics and economic systems also. Paizs parodies those forms and, in doing so, simultaneously pinpoints their power, their appeal and their rank, mindless absurdity. And that, if it matters, is a peculiarly Canadian talent. It is something we've definitely got on Big Brother: we know him better than he knows himself. To bring it back to Robert Fothergill, yes, being Canadian might mean enduring a condition of acute cultural alienation and inferiority, but being Canadian like John Paizs means turning that condition into a strategy for assaulting the dominant media and turning trash into something resembling art. ●

1/ See "Coward, Bully or Clown: The Dream-life of a Younger Brother," ***Canadian Film Reader***, Seth Feldman & Joyce Nelson, eds., Toronto, 1977, pp 234-250.