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. 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, semiconatose casualties of a cathode-codified generation. It is this very obbliviousness to their condition as a condition, this unflappable deadpan sparseness, 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...

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Paizes is both a regurgitator and an ironic commentator on the phenomenon of subconscious infiltration by an alien ideology whose fundamental elements have been made cultural schizophrenics of a generation. We instinctively associate the title of TV-toasted Anglo-Canadians who shoveled their snowy driveways while yearning for the blue beam of boxed cautiousness with familiar music, familiar images, and movies. That is not only did Captain Kangaroo and Jethro Bodeen teach us to rec-room rodents to speak and read, but they gave us an ideological framework of shared raw anxiety that bears no resemblance to 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 impulses we had during the day were simply and sensually stroked away in the early evening by a warm dip into the inviting, opaquely alluring world of groovy TV signals.

While John Paizes is during the crucial, formative period of irreplaceable ideological corruption, I am sure we were participating in the same collective identity-building desolvage; I am sure we were completely bewitched, but I am also sure that during the day we were just as completely bewitched, emotionally, economically and geographically, Paizes and I nevertheless share the same deep, primal and powerful demon (Skeeter, Eddy, Spock's ears. Lucy Ball's hair. James Bond's dinner jacket and Fred Flintstone's feet), a passion of the collection of corporately supplied and politically bound and politically non-conscious – a million peers into passive, pie-eyed tomatoes, snugly rooted in the polyester plush pillows of the glow-in-the-dark commercial night.

That, I suppose, is why Paizes' films hit me like the proverbial bolt. Shown in the context of the Perspective Canada series at last fall's Festival of Festivals – an unfathomably abysmal evening of mini-movies p.m. ghetto slot, thus effectively minimizing the possibility of any potentially sizable audience – Paizes' 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 third picture was a lost Nothing But Dead Elms (1982), was not shown in Toronto). But the response of the audience that was present was accordingly enthusiastic. The reason for the films' success is, I suppose, that they address and confront the modes of dominant junk media in any effective way, it is because they do so in the inarticulate, unself-conscious and unself-conscious, unself-conscious manner 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 its near-anal, shot-reaction-shot format.

If this plundering of prefabricated forms is the predominant postmodern pursuit (and Paizes as so postmodern as Young Bear Runnung Miin, with his commanding and distinguishing characteristic of the films is the alacrity with which they adopt these second-hand pre-existing forms, and the reflexive, logical, satirical and patently non-didactic – the form of the concept always takes precedence over its education. But this is, I suppose, equally notable is the gradual closing-in object by subject the films indicate, until, in The International Style, the two are virtually indistinguishable. In any case, Paizes' films, as always, played by Paizes are somnambulistically driven on a quest for an idealized, archetypal, '60s sexual revolution. The films are structured like a fantasy antedote 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 non-conventionalized world against which to distinguish fantasy from fantasy. By the time Billy has evolved into The International Style's Nick, he is fully immersed in a Twilight Zone-like universe made up entirely of the forms and conventions of regurgitated pop media. What Billy so desperately wants to escape is not some backward peek through rose or dun-coloured glasses as American Graffiti and Animal House respectively do – Paizes films, with frequently deadpan accuracy, adopt the modes of '60s media kitsch, from the My Three Sons-like opening graphics, to Gerry Klyn's mechanical reaction-shot editing. The striking intelligence and singularity of the films is thus in the forms and narrations of the system as systems. In painstakingly reproducing the forms as well as the thematic concerns of '60s pop narratives.

The films are a man's pursuit of an ideology that has in practice – the Barthesian dictum that all cultural mythology only become apparent and artificial once time has elapsed to allow them to fall from their aura of authority and awe for others. Like the old system of cultural codes, which now seems obvious or campy, the new will be invisible to us for a time. And like the aura being at least: Hill Street Blues will be every bit as kitschy 20 years from now as Dragnet seems today.

Unquestionably, the leap 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 parodic and an authentic ideological framework it helps shape and support. Beam me up, indeed, Mr. Spock: how can I ever watch Star Trek these days?

Jargon-juggling and syllable-slipping notwithstanding, this is not to posit Paizes as a kind of prairie Godard, coldly and stiffly recreating an era. His films so didactically chunky you could eat them with a fork. Indeed, what is most immediately appealing and appreciated is the genuine, unfettered nature that ultimately facilitates the degree of intellectual response and political relevance the films possess at all times. If you do not address and confront the modes of dominant junk media in any effective way, it is because they do so in the inarticulate, unself-conscious, unself-conscious manner. 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 its near-anal, shot-reaction-shot format.

Regardless of overall cohesion actually marks it as a score of chirping birds and singing strings, to Gerry Klym's accurate, adopt the modes of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound magnifies the abstract use of diegetic sound mag...
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 is set by this marvellously deadpan combatants: Nick, disaffected, bored thus set by this marvellously deadpan "Mom lawns, filling pools and readying supper prepare a hamburger for the barbecue."

The International Style effectively suggests a cause-and-effect relationship between the media messages make for mindless entertainment and the pools hide showdown that enriched while diverging from the central line in terms of linearity, effectively making for mindless entertainment and the absurd middle-class melodrama that mattered. So why complicate the story—by the dictates and skewered logic of the media-melting pot juxtapositions between the mode of pop culture and the object of mass media craftsmanship, and lends them a potential for truly relevant grasp of such imitative precision, they matter. As to theirs, the cultural conditions of those entertainment forms that once seemed so cozy familiar, even to us who watched from a distance created not only by geography but by politics and economic systems also. Paiz's 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 that 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 Paiz means turning that condition into a strategy for assaulting the dominant media and turning trash into something resembling art.

If you're offended by this parody of 'The Dream-life of a Younger Brother,' Canadian Film Reader, Seth Feldman & Joyce Nelson, eds., Toronto, 1977, pp. 234-235.

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 International Style of the '50s superspy movie or TV program. Here the distinction between the mode of pop culture and the man-made superman has been submerged in precolored, ethnic enclaves of Frankenstein-like blemishes in the same narrative space, the uninitiated viewer might feel he's stumbled upon an exhumed episode of Batman or The Man From UNCLE: supervillains match wits and hurl accented epithets at superhero Nick, who like them is living for the cut-rate hard-core B-movie Xanadu of a pleasure dome known as Starland, which is despotically run by a slick-haired film star, played by a packed with judo fights, pointy boots and swelling '60's esque gothic motifs. The International Style represents the logical denouement to this evolving cycle of films by a promising prime time postmodern. The film ends, in a way, in precisely the place Billy Bobski dreamed of being, in a universe totally governed by the dictates and skewed 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, Paiz 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 Paiz 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 observer—culture and the shop that distinguishes these films and lends them a potential for truly relevant grasp among Canadians that is uniquely among our filmmakers of this generation. As to their Canuckness, I'd argue they couldn't be more ours, in spite of or because of their predilection for modes of popular American media. By subtly re-arranging the elements and iconographic road-signs of American movies and TV shows, Paiz establishes a distinct critical distance between the films and the object of their mimicry. 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 cozy familiar, even to us who watched from a distance created not only by geography but by politics and economic systems also. Paiz's 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 that 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 Paiz means turning that condition into a strategy for assaulting the dominant media and turning trash into something resembling art.

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