

Nardo Castillo's

Claire cette nuit et demain

Claire cette nuit et demain is quite simply the most beautiful (and so the most perfected) feature film ever made in Canada, this is both an occasion for wonderment and perplexity. In a simpler time, the astonishment produced by aesthetic effects working entirely on their own terms was known as the Beautiful. In our more problematic world, this view has been renamed *kitsch* or, in Milan Kundera's words quoted in the film, "the aesthetic attitude that negates shit." In this sense, *Claire cette nuit et demain* is a triumph of *kitsch* by its radical negation of shit.

However, as an aesthetic concept, 'shit' has a wide variety of meanings, suggestive of flaws, inadequacies, and failure. In its most serious sense, shit is a derogation of the natural, and so stylistically its negation is a profound denial of the natural and the aesthetic that could be termed 'naturalistic' that has had such a deeply formative hold on Canadian cinema.

The drastic denial of the natural, upon which *Claire cette nuit et demain* so brilliantly constructs its aesthetic, is the technological invasion of the biological that informs the film, beginning with its opening and only sex scene: video images of magnified sperm. For *Claire*'s is the fully modern world of the educated eyeball, at one end, the voyeurism of the scientific eye's penetration of the organs of human sexuality, and at the other the spectacle of the image consumer's comfortably narcissistic interface with the surfaces of appearance. It is the tension between these two extremes (total exposure and total reflection) that *Claire cette nuit et demain* occupies, and pivots upon, in a commanding display of post-modernist illusionism that not only deconstructs the film itself and the viewer, but in the process shakes Canadian cinema to its foundations.

With *Claire cette nuit et demain*, Canadian cinema is finally liberated as an (independent) aesthetic, free to indulge, and be indulged in, on its own terms.

Claire (Liliane Clune) is, in the words of a currently running TV commercial for sanitary tampons, a "thoroughly modern" woman. In her late '20s, she is successfully running her own business, a publishing house. She exists - at work, at home, in the city - in a completely renovated environment: tasteful, artistic, stylized. At the office, she is working through a manuscript appropriately entitled "Immoderities"; at home she is reading Kundera's *Insupportable Lightness of Being*. Her life is in control; no messy relationships; she is free.

But dissatisfied. Biological yearnings and her last relationship, now over, with a theatre director, have brought to the fore the issue of pregnancy (as she puts it, "the problem of maternity versus liberty") and, as the film begins with

her visit to the input clinic, has tentatively decided to be artificially inseminated. In making such a rational decision, she has to, however, select somebody's sperm with which to be impregnated and this selection brings into question her system of values: because she has to choose, not between people, but between *genera*. And as she is at the peak of her fertility cycle, she must choose now, that day. She opts for the sperm of an artistic type, (but not too young because that would indicate he's not yet a well-known painter).

Her choice settled, Claire has to return that evening for the operation. Back at the office, she can't work. She goes to visit a client, a distributor, whose advances she rebuffs with the dire warning that he could come out of this a father. She wanders through Old Montreal. She buys a blouse and ends up at the studio of the painter Julien - who's not only an artistic type, but used to be her lover.

Julien (Luc Matte) is doing well; a Senator is interested in his painting, though these signs of success also leave him dissatisfied. Julien plays life as it lays - "I let life come to me, I don't provoke it." In his painting-filled studio, there's a written quote, tacked to a wall, from Chamfort's maxims, that, in this society, sex "is the contact of two epidermises." Neither Claire nor Julien have seen each other for a year; a cautious flirtation develops. But just as Claire is (perhaps) about to come to the point, one of Julien's girl-friends drops in.

Claire returns to the office. Soon Julien appears with flowers - or rather it's Julien saying he's the double of the real Julien who's waiting downstairs. He takes her off to see a Russian countess who, among other things, was Mayakovsky's lover. Now in her '70s, she reveals that, of all human desires, sex is the last to go. And, as if to prove her point, the visit is interrupted by the arrival of a man. As she shows Claire and Julien out, the countess delivers the credo she inherited from her late father: "If you look life in the face, you won't see death coming."

Claire and Julien meander through Old Montreal's reflections and refractions. Too late Claire remembers her appointment at the clinic; she calls from a booth. The doctor, her white coat undone, tells her it can wait for another time, then returns to amorous gropings with another white-coat that Claire's phonecall interrupted.

Claire and Julien decide to have supper together; as she returns from buying the food, he's kissing a woman who slips away when Claire appears. They begin walking to her house but jump into a taxi when Claire is overcome by the urge to pee.

At Claire's house, the flirtation continues through the making and eating of supper. It's in this context that Julien reads the epigraph about *kitsch* from Kundera's novel, and Claire prophesies that "One day everything will be *kitsch*."

Predictably, they end up in the bedroom. The phone rings. Wrong number. They try again, but at that point Claire tells Julien that she wants to get pregnant. Julien rapidly loses his ardour.

The bedroom again. Claire and Julien are under the sheets; she's on her side staring ahead. He asks her if she's sad; she replies no, that sometimes in life, everything can seem fine and yet be sad. Is it afterwards or another time, either in the past or in the future? *Did* anything, in fact, happen?

The film now cuts to Claire earlier that day walking past the boutique where she had bought the blouse. But she does not go in. She arrives at Julien's studio; however, it's arranged differently.

He's ecstatic; he's off to New York where he's gotten a show. He's in a great hurry; what did she want? There's no answer but the end-credits.

A re-telling of the narrative line of a film is always inadequate, and perhaps even more so with this film, whose plot is not only uneventful, but is so intricately a function of all the other elements that come together to give *Claire cette nuit et demain* its perfect wholeness that, like the Cheshire cat's smile,

dissolves itself by the film's end. These elements include Allen Smith's stunning photography; Anne Pritchard, Jean-Baptiste Tard's and Michèle Forest's splendid set design; the mastery of the lighting; the richness of the sound-editing; all these visual and aural elements coordinated with consummate self-confidence by director Nardo Castillo who, with co-producer Arnie Gelbart, co-authored a superb script among whose many quotable lines I can't resist reproducing this one: "He's says he's got many things to tell but nothing to say."

If the acting is uniformly on its marks throughout, surely some special applause must be given to Liliane Clune who carries much of the weight of this film by her remarkable ability to convey the insupportable lightness of contemporary being. And the Montreal that shimmers through the film - caught in the voices' slightly pretentious, almost Castilian, nasality of current Montrealese; its baroque architecture - there's a high-angle shot taken near the Hôtel de Ville whose lighting makes the surroundings into a tiny Versailles; its stylized *pastiche* of the Old and New Worlds - is a city irradiated with a cinematic uniqueness that no other film made here has ever yet gotten to such a degree.

For there are no exteriors in *Claire* outside the contexts of urban culture; every glimpse the film takes outside the immediate 'reality' of its story only serves to throw back the self-reflections of the characters themselves as physical surfaces of appearance. Like Claire's own 'life,' the film works because of its complete self-control, or negation of exactly what's 'shitty' in Canadian cinema: namely, its dependence upon a referential reality greater than film-reality.

By this achievement, *Claire cette nuit et demain* catapults itself outside of the referential universe of strictly Canadian cinema into that larger universe of the more purely filmic. In such terms (and for what they're worth) *Claire cette nuit et demain* commandingly holds its own with mini-classics like Rohmer's

● Perfectly postmodern: *Claire cette nuit et demain* leads Luc Matte and Liliane Clune



Ma nuit chez Maude (minus the theology), Woody Allen's *Interiors* (minus the hysteria), or Tanner's *Le milieu du monde* (minus the passion); that is, at ease among the other personal universes of contemporary aurorial cinema.

Secondly, in so effortlessly soaring to this standard, *Claire cette nuit et demain* ironically ups the ante for the Canadian feature in general, and strongly becomes yet another indicator of the possibility of a real creative boom in the not-too distant future (some elements of which are already visible here and there). It is worth pointing out that *Claire* was done in an unhurried 20 days on a \$600,000 budget by a carefully chosen and very professional team, an approach to filmmaking that visibly commends itself.

The irony, of course, is that the 'secret' of *Claire's* success rests upon the powerful infusion into the film of the aesthetic of the TV commercial, that medium's most successful form which has re-energized such staples as the cop show (most notably, *Miami Vice* and for a Canadian equivalent, if to a lesser extent, *Night Heat*).

Yet if *Claire cette nuit et demain* most beautifully balances its constitutive tensions, as *Claire*, the character, says of her success, as she muses on the freedom that she controls but cannot live, "It's all very nice, but it's an identity card for whom?" Beyond the dazzling display of resplendant surfaces, there's a profound (and growing) existential anxiety that the film simply points to; for, like *Claire*, it does not know either what to do when the polymorphous perversity of existence itself becomes merely generic, but, like *Claire*, it can, for a while at least, seek comfort and refuge in the aestheticization of life.

For the *kitsch* universe - that is, one from which shit has been negated - comes with a price. Eventually, massive aesthetic constipation results.

But why anticipate problems? For now, it should really be quite enough to savour the fact that *Claire cette nuit et demain* is that astounding, rare thing in cinema: a masterpiece.

Michael Dorland •

CLAIRE CETTE NUIT ET DEMAIN d. Nardo Castillo p. Arnie Gelbart, Charles Ohayon sc. Castillo, Gelbart from an idea by Victor Désy 1st a. d. Mireille Goulet cont. Brigitte Germain d. o. p. Allen Smith asst. cam. Robert Guertin trainee Borek Sodivsek stills Attila Dory art. dec. Anne Pritchard set des. Jean-Baptiste Tard des. Michèle Forest asst. des. Nathalie Noël props. Daniel Huysmans montage/dec. Paul Vanzadloff p. sup. Lorraine DuHamel admin. J. Serge Alary acct. Chantal Groleau p. sec. Johanne Messier loc. scout Pierre Laberge p. assts. Norbert Dufour, Frédéric Lefebvre ed. François Gill asst. ed. Christine Denault sd. Patrick Rousseau boom Véronique Gabillaud make-up Diane Simard ward. John Stowe, Huguette Gagné dresser Francine Blais gaffer Jacques Fortier elect. Claude Fortier, Gilles Fortier key grip François Dupéré grip Sylvain Labrecque urit. pub. Monique Gignac, Brigitte Germain l.p. Liliane Clune, Luc Matte, Nicole Leblanc, Maryse Pelletier, Margarita Stocker, François Cartier, Gisèle Rousseau, Michel Laperrière, Johanne Messier, Francisco, Francine Alepin, Denise Boulanger, Jacques Leblanc, Roger Léger, France Laverdière, Louis-M. Morin, Pascale Navarro, Véronique Pinette, Max St-Amour, François Sylvestre, Michel Provost, and the voices of Victor Désy and Jean Lafontaine. p.c. Cléo 24 Inc., (514) 842-8336, with financial participation of Telefilm, SGC, and SRC. dist. Vivafilm Running time: 145 mins.

John Paizs'

Crime Wave

C *Crime Wave*, the first feature film by Winnipeg's thoroughly postmodern John Paizs, displays all the healthy shortcomings of an early work by a potential mindblower of a director: too crammed with ideas and greedy for gags to heed the statutes of coherent plot development, *Crime Wave* unfortunately suggests that the hoary old critical cliché about parts amounting to more than wholes can't be retired yet.

But those parts, in this case, are both abundant and remarkable. Moreover, they can be discovered not only in up-front bits of inspired silliness (like the character who arrives at a suburban costume party - and who can't understand why conversation crumbles in his presence - dressed as the psycho who threatened to blow himself up in the neighbourhood Mac's Milk), but on such less immediately gutbusting levels as editing, soundtrack and (honest) colour-processing. Thematically, the film is no shirker, either: while remaining principally and effectively a comedy, *Crime Wave* ponders such pertinent but unlikely laugh-fodder as the relationship between culture and social behaviour; Canadian cultural Ameriphilia and its schizoid effects: creative stagnation, and the perpetually self-replenishing nature of popular culture. To complain of the movie's lacking in overall consistency is, in fact, to ignore the wealth of those ideas and elements that keep popping up in the middle of the road and throwing *Crime Wave* off course - Paizs may not take us where he tells us he

will (or where we think he should), but he sure does take us on one wily and wacky ride.

With his first four (significantly sit-com-length) short films (available, like *Crime Wave*, from the Winnipeg Film Group), Paizs established a mode of filmmaking that simultaneously reproduced, defamiliarized and criticized the American pop culture dreck that, like it or not, comprised the most sensational and penetrating visceral experience for most middle-class suburban Canadian kids growing up in the post-television age (kids for whom Don Messer was no substitute for other Dons like Adams, Knotts or Corleone). What distinguishes Paizs' practice from those myriad forms he so uncannily, and with deadpan directness, emulates, is a surrealist sensibility that exposes the structures and assumptions behind these media-systems by simply scrambling them. Thus, in *The International Style* (1983), Paizs' most purely surreal film, B-Western cowboys invade a James Bondish dinner soirée and, like splatter-movie zombies, threaten to cannibalize the participants. What makes the short films so effective, both as entertainment and polemic, is the uncovering of the fundamentally systemic nature of pop culture forms they so gleefully vandalize; in other words, a blasphemous magnification of the basic principle of internal logic upon which most pop culture narratives depend on to maintain their credibility and transparency. Paizs' films challenge the hegemony of these structures, not by blowing them apart with ridicule but by conflating a number of them together *without* disrupting the narrative flow. The revelation lies in the realization that, while characters, costumes and conventions may change, the basic story remains the same - to be played out eternally - and with an absurd subconscious, dreamlike shuffling of elements, forever deep in our TV-perforated sensibilities.

Crime Wave takes this practice of deconstructive, ironic mimicry and pushes it a step further: it's a meta-meta-movie-movie. The frame of the film, set in an impossibly sunshiny, picture-perfect suburban neighbourhood (replete with perennial bird-chirps on the soundtrack) is pure '50s family sitcom - when Eva (Eva Kovacs), the 12-year-old narrator of the film, makes her daily morning skip to the mailbox, you could swear you see Wally and Beaver pass by.

The sitcom context, which introduces us to the cipher-like, would-be "colour crime movie" writer Steven Penny (John Paizs), through the Terence Malick-like device of a young girl's narration, also establishes *Crime Wave's* principal strategy of smudging characteristic distinctions between style and content, fantasy and reality, imagined and experienced, medium and mediated. While the story, which revolves around Steven's comically-lachrymose attempts to surmount the somewhat selective strain of writer's block he suffers from (he's great with beginnings and endings, but stymied by middles), functions at the outset as the point of access into a number of increasingly surreal "imaginary" sequences - Steven's story fragments visualized, his nightmares and hallucinations - the point of *Crime Wave* is not the distinction between actual and idealized experience, but the absolute interdependence of both. This is evident, if not yet obvious, from the opening, which introduces Steven's situation in stylistic terms that are every bit as codified in generic terms as his subsequent stories and hallucinations - if Steven's *life* is rendered as a kind of Kafkaesque Bob Cummings Show, can we really trust the *imaginary* nature of his mondo-bizarro dreams and stories? That *Crime Wave's* world is one where the media, its consumers and its effects are indistinguishable is made obvious during the sequence in Steven's tiny, garage-attic apartment (lit only by the appropriately cathode-like blue of an electric streetlamp outside the window), when a roomful of characters from Steven's middleless colour crime movies materialize and commence to party, flirt and eventually brawl with one another. In *Crime Wave's* micro-waved world of media and mental meltdown, Jung's collective unconscious runs smack into Larry Curly and Moc.

Playing on a neat reversal of *The Wizard of Oz* (itself a mythic pop text of not inconsiderable influence) the final part of *Crime Wave* depicts the odyssey of innocent abroad Steven (a kind of catatonic Canadian Dorothy Gale) to Kansas, of course, where he has been summoned by bogus script-doctor C. Jolly (a lizard-lipped milquetoast with a ten-gallon stetson and a parallel capacity for homicidal perversion). While this passage in *Crime Wave* was extensively criticised following its Toronto Festival of Festivals première because its sombre surrealism subverted the gag-ridden satire of the film's first 45 minutes*, Steven's eerie trip to the post-apocalyptic, chemically-poisoned night-world of *Crime Wave's* Kansas is a logical and profoundly resonant extension of the hitherto purely comic descent into the media melting-pot. The trip to America is, for Steven and the

• *Crime Wave's* John Paizs experiencing media and mental meltdown

