George Mihalka's
The Blue Man

George Mihalka’s The Blue Man seems to be Canada's answer to such American films as Paul Schrader's Taxi Driver and Tony Scott's The Hunger. Instead of the vampires or menacing felines featured in the earlier films, this story deals with astral travellers who become sexual vampires or menacing felines.

At the center of the story is Paul Sharpe (Winston Rekert), a director of TV commercials who is fed up with both his work and his family, and finds pleasure in his experiments with astral projection — the ability, we are told, to leave the confines of the body and enter the free world of the soul. Things, however, start going wrong when both Paul’s doctor and father-in-law are killed in a most gruesome way as a result of Paul’s flights of fancy. The worst part of it though, is that Paul isn’t able to remember the dreams which caused the deaths and doesn’t seem able to control the destination of his astral form during sleep.

Perplexed and confused, Paul goes to see Janus (Karen Black), a mysterious dancer and ex-junkie who had first introduced him to the wonderful world of astral projection. She tells him that he is just confused by his new-found powers, and that everything will turn out fine.

Obviously, everything isn’t “just fine” and Kaufman (John Novak), the police detective assigned to the case, knows it. Kaufman has a strong feeling that Paul is somehow connected to the mysterious deaths, and starts looking into his past. He discovers that seven years earlier, Paul had made a documentary called Wandering Souls, a film which told the story of two supposed astral travellers who, periodically, are in touch with other souls, and start looking into his past. He discovers that seven years earlier, Paul had made a documentary called Wandering Souls, a film which told the story of two supposed astral travellers who, periodically, are in touch with other souls, and that everything will turn out fine.

At this point, Paul doesn’t really know what’s going on, Kaufman (although justifiably confused) has been able to put most of the clues into place, and the audience has the whole thing already figured out. If the real point of a thriller is to keep you on your toes until the last scene, then during which you can predict the ending two thirds of the way through cannot be considered entirely successful.

Certain sequences in The Blue Man, especially at the beginning, are quite effective and enshroud those sections of the film in a suitably chilling atmosphere. But as the plot thickens (or more accurately, coagulates), the thin line between the characters and the characters which they control becomes more and more apparent. The story is ripe with cinematic possibilities, they remain unrealized.

The major problem with The Morning Man lies in the way the title role is written. According to the film, Nadeau, a nice middle-class boy, turned to armed robbery for the thrill. Why he chose armed robbery instead of sex, drugs or addictive exercise, more common middle-class stimulants, is never explained.

The way Nadeau is depicted — strong, smart, motivated and oh-so-nice — they could all have been interchangeable choices.

His criminal past aside, Nadeau has no flaws of character. Obstacles are laid in his path only to be surmounted. The same discipline and sureness that made him an excellent bank robber now make him a model of self-rehabilitation.

Nadeau’s Achilles’ heel is supposed to be his circle of friends, a sure lure back into a life of crime. But it is presented as helpless (they give him money, a new social insurance number, time) and no more than a minor nuisance (they are total failures in their attempts to seduce or pressure him). Since Nadeau has no weaknesses to confront, nothing can save him from the path to righteousness. Frankly, he’s a bore.

Daniele J. Sussa’s, the director, is widely experienced in theatre and television but The Morning Man is her first theatrical feature. And it shows. Shot mostly in close-ups and medium long shots, The Morning Man looks like a TV movie. One is also very conscious that everything in the film has been ‘staged’. The action takes place mostly in interiors, whether it be inside jails, apartments, or cars. Places are used as mere settings in which the actors can exchange dialogue.

The film really begs for a sense of milieu that is just not there. This may have something to do with the stark hybridization that occurs when one shoots a modern-day Quebeçois folk story in English. The language, the turn of phrase, the distinctness of place, all these things that immediately create a background for characters in Québécois films is missing. Nothing is made of Nadeau (played by Bruno Doyon with a heavily accented English) that doesn’t help his line readings fail in love with Kate Johnson, a WASP doctor played by Kerrie Keane. The film feels strangely dislocated.

Sussa uses no ‘establishing shots’. Though a more experienced director could have turned this into an asset, she just leaves the audience disoriented. We get a very limited sense of where the characters are, where they want to go or where they are actually heading. A good example is the escape scene at the beginning of the film. Suissa does not give us a long shot of the jail the convicts are escaping. Thus we don’t know if it’s difficult, if they’re heading in the right direction, or what their chances of making it are. The scene lacks tension. Though it’s clear that Sussa is more interested in the psychology of her characters than in suspense, I don’t see any reason for mucking up scenes like this one — not fully exploiting action scenes that are dictated by the story do not make us better understand the characters.

René Verzier, (who’s justly been nominated for a Genie as best cinematographer for his work here), has shot The Morning Man in pastel blues, greys and dirty whites and it looks...