

Russell Stephens' **Regeneration**

In Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver is told of a race of immortal humans who never die but, unfortunately, never stop aging either. The romantic notion of eternal life, deflated in *Gulliver's* by Swift's icy irony, is treated with equal scepticism in Russell Stephens' intelligent and original new film, **Regeneration**. In this peculiar variation on the theme of eternity, dead people can be brought back to life, 're-generated', from photographs by means of a complex computer process. From this startling premise Stephens constructs a film which not only satirizes scientific utopianism, it also investigates the nature and significance of the image. And although **Regeneration** stumbles occasionally, it does represent, with its striking imagery and ambitious thematic concerns, the product of a distinctive cinematic imagination.

Premiered at the Vancouver International Film Festival, **Regeneration** evolved out of a shorter version Stephens made while attending Simon Fraser University. After graduation, he decided to expand his idea to feature-length and, with former classmate-cum-producer Tony Dean, a budget (including deferrals) of \$330,000, and three years of shooting, the film was completed.

Using a fairy-tale narrative structure replete with storyteller (an Irish one, at that, telling his tale to two gravediggers) as well as some extreme character types, **Regeneration** concerns the unique discovery of "idiot savant" professor Andrew B. (John Anderson). From a photograph plucked from the lobby of Discovery Park (his high-tech employer), Professor B resurrects a dead colleague, Mr. Bright, bringing him back in the

form of a mobile, articulate video camera (Clearly, this regeneration requires some physical adjustments by the regenerated!).

Revealing his achievement to a journalist, and lost in fantasies of fame ("smoked salmon steaks and the Letterman show"), the professor soon encounters unforeseen problems: thousands send snapshots to have loved ones or pets brought back; rabid crowds demonstrate to force the 'regeneration' of Elvis (Stephens' sly comment on the domination of American images in Canadian culture); a corporate crackdown is instigated by Mr. Bright's life insurance company which, after learning of his spectacular violation of policy, wants its money back - with interest. Discovery Park's board of directors decides to "terminate" Mr. Bright, seizes the Professor's lab, and dismisses him. Overhearing the news of his imminent disconnection, Mr. Bright heads, quite literally, for the hills.

Meanwhile, the head of Discovery Park, an executive shark named Mr. Funk (portrayed by Dermot Hennesly with a chilling Kubrickian blend of venomous charm and restrained madness), wants to use the professor's findings to prevent his own death. When his stooges, stealing B's research, fail to regenerate him from an old 8 X 10 glossy, Funk calls for the capture of Professor B.

It is evident from these strange happenings that this film explores its principal themes (immortality, power, ontology of the image), in an intentionally artificial cinematic universe. **Regeneration** is not traditional Canadian realism. The effects, comic or otherwise, arise out of the film's own set of idiosyncratic and provocative narrative possibilities. For Stephens, like John Paizs, form is content.

Throughout the twisted tale are examples, verbal and visual, of Stephens' witty, ironic perspective on myths of scientific progress and on utopian thinking. Indeed, his storyteller describes Discovery Park as "one of those high-tech places where all sorts of immoral experiments take place". In **Regeneration's** world, parking meters don't work, cars don't start or are piled in scrapyards, and doors won't always open. When you add human fallibility, self-delusion (when B talks of regenerating whole civilizations from mere fragments, Stephens visually subverts his protagonist's grandiloquence by cutting to an extreme long shot), and bestial corporate interests (the walls of Funk's office are adorned with animal heads) to the equation, a sceptical response to 'progress' isn't just appropriate, it is essential.

On another level, this deceptively whimsical film also ponders the significance of images, from the family snapshot to the life-size poster of Elvis. The politics of image-making, particularly the manipulative construction of television images, is explored, as is the notion of image as replacement for experience (cinema itself?); after all, Bright is actu-

ally a regenerated image trapped in an image-making device: a camera. These understated philosophical concerns give the film an interesting self-reflexive dimension.

Within the deliberate fairy-tale artifices of narrative and character in **Regeneration**, then, are found Stephens' strengths and weaknesses as a director. These artifices permit him to play more freely with ideas and images, but sometimes force the film's comic infrastructure to groan under the weight of the intellectual superstructure placed upon it. Moreover, his film is hurt by John Anderson's uneven and, despite the context of artifice, unconvincing performance as Professor B, for it often impedes **Regeneration's** tone and rhythm. Some bad post-synchronization doesn't help either. Nevertheless, **Regeneration** is generally well-written (there are some howlers, however), competently shot (several images are brilliantly composed), crisply edited, intellectually energetic, and, ultimately, a satisfying first film.

Tom McSorley •

REGENERATION d./sc. Russell Stephens p. Anthony James Dean prod. co. International Heliotrope Ltd. ed. Shirley Anne Claydon lighting design John Houtman d.o.p. Tobias Schliessler m. Bill Napier-Hemy cast. co-ord David Findlay assop p. Michael Tang prod. man. Jim Hamm prod. des. Keith Grout 1st a.d. Bruno Pacheco 2nd. a.d. Attila Bertalan sc. cont. Tracy Jeffrey assoc. film ed. Haida Paul gaffer John Houtman key grip Peter Reynolds dolly grip John Christie grips Gary Viola. Craig Kelpin add. photog. Cam North. Tom Turnbull asst. cam./2nd unit photog Dan Novak sd. mix. Tony Giacinti boom. Linda Andrews, Margo Vanderham ward sup. Jori Woodman ward asst. Dianna Paterson, Judy Radul make-up sup. Kathy Lofton make-up assts. Jenny Dodsworth, Kelly Faraday, Roy Richard prop co-ord Todd Pittson robotics co-ord Peter Reynolds Mr. Bright's Construction Ivo Kokan. Andrew MacFadyen set dec. Chris Beudet asst. set dec. Tom Crowe, Bill Mullen carp Chryse Gibson craft services SFU Student Union Pub, Andrew Dolemy driver Robin Mossley prod. assts. Nick Dharsee, Lavonne Girard, Paul Guenette, Gary Harvey, John Halliwell, April Hawes, Marcia Krendenster, Steve Mitchell, Maureen O'Hearn, Neil Thompson add. sd. rec. George Leger, Bill Napier-Hemy sd. eds. Shirley Claydon, Tony Dean asst sd. eds. Michael McGarry, Marek Cieszewski, Leanna Pietrobrown, Lodi Bulter m. ed. Debbie Rurak re-rec. mix. Barry P. Jones, Peter Kelly neg. conforming Gay Black prod. acc. Roland Dean post prod. admin and acc. Lodi Butler auditor Paul J. Masse, C.A. pub. David Hauka stills photog. Karen Hill storyboards Ken Lum, Keith Grout typing Carmen Michaud logo des. Don Wimbles title des. Dorothy Cameron stunt d. Ken Zirzinger Fil Lab Alpha cine Services titles and film opticals West Coast Film Optical Video Post Prod. C.K.V.U. Television, Northwest communications With Special thanks To: Cineworks Independent Filmmakers Society, Telefilm Canada, National Film Board of Canada, the Canada Council, Tegra Industries, The Cutting Edge Video Service, BCE Development Corporation, Standard Building Supplies, Westminster Volkswagen, Benndorg Verster, Discovery Park (Burnaby, B.C.), University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, I.p. John Anderson Marek Cieszewski, Suzanne Ristic, Dermot Hennesly, Dennis Shooter, Michael Gandley, Rob Johnson, Toman Dimitri, Len Greenwood, Stephen Huddart, Rob Morton, Jeannette Wall, Colin Griffith, Wade MacIntyre, Chris Marioni, Gordon Anderson, Henry Flam, Rod Graham, Phil Smith, Kay Jackson, Tony Bardock, John Cotton, Hugh Coulson, Edna Drake, Paul Fruit, Robert Grace, Emma Hill, Eric Horsfall, Roman Podhora, Mark Jaworski, Harold Bernot, Dan Novak, Lorrie Peppin, Ian Tiles, Bob Molley, Terry Harrasym, Joy Dumaresque, Andre Renaud, Beatrice Zelinger, Don Marsh, Zena Dearwallor, Tim Dean, David Eddy, Branch Lyons, Neil MacDonald, Joseph MacLean, Ken Montgomery, Alison Stevenson, Dorothy Tinkley, Martin Cieszeski, Przemek Fedyczowski, Cleo Corbett, Jane Bull, Tracey Jeffrey, John

Christie, Ken Lum, Bill Mullen, Robert Mossley, Bill Napier-Hemy, April Hawes, Ellen Kareses, Maria Karases, Harry Rankin, Michael Jones, James Dean Hirtschfeld, John Jewel, Terry Birs, Roby Arden, Jim Hamm, Stan Rogel, Stokely Seip, Martin Jensen, Brandon Aiken, Judy Blair, Keith Grout, Jane MacDonald, Heidi Peltzer, Leanna Sheckter, Lila Stephens, Michella Armachello, Cindy Block, Julia MacIsaac, Norman Barrington-Foote, Steve Harrison, Valeda Hett, Michael McGarry, Tracey Stephens running time 85 min.

Francis Mankiewicz's **And Then You Die**

The publicity release for **And Then You Die** describes the film as "English Canada's first gangster movie." It isn't; having been preceded, at the very least, by Les Rose's **The Life and Times of Edwin Alonzo Boyd** (1983). Moving constantly between documentary and fiction sequences, Alonzo attempts a fascinating, open-ended examination of the changing relationships between a real-life Canadian gangster, the socio-economic milieu from which such a figure is spawned, and the contemporary media (as well as the film itself) which both (re)fabricates the gangster's image and exploits that image for profit. **And Then You Die** accomplishes none of these things.

And Then You Die tells the story of the final nine days of fictive Montreal gangster Eddie Griffin (Kenneth Welsh). Griffin's life and minor empire of drug dealing and loansharking come to an abrupt end due to a coincidental combination of betrayal, bad luck, misinformation, and uncharacteristically incorrect judgments on the part of the protagonist. In addition, Eddie is hounded by detective James McGrath (R.H. Thompson), apparently the only cop on the force whom Griffin cannot buy.

True to the sinuous weave of the plot, McGrath is only partially responsible for Griffin's death. It is McGrath who forces Griffin's cohort, Wally Deagan (Wayne Robson) to become a police informant. Later, attempting to extricate himself from this situation, Deagan asks Garou (Pierre Chagnon), the leader of a bike gang and one of Griffin's associates, to kill McGrath. Instead, Garou convinces Deagan to set up a hit on Griffin.

It is possible to abstract from this plot synopsis the major failings of the film. To begin with, the apparent intricacy of the plot attempts to function both as an index of the complexities of Griffin's dealings, and as a means of suggesting the size of his enterprise (and, thus, how great is its collapse). The size and intricacy of Griffin's 'empire' (to borrow a term from the press release) is loosely implied rather than demonstrated. This is a tactical error on the part of the screenwriters (Wayne Grigsby and Alun Hibbert). Since Griffin's empire is fundamental to character motivation - it is what Griffin

• Demonstrating for the return of the King in **Regeneration**





• R.H. Thompson and Kenneth Welsh parry in **And Then You Die**

desires to extend and what others desire to co-opt or eliminate – the audience must intuit the extent of Griffin's dealings in order to appreciate his plight. Otherwise, one is forced to ask: what empire? and so what?

And Then You Die is a classical narrative film. A clearer delineation, or a few examples thereof, of the day-to-day workings of Griffin's business practices would have provided an essential level of causality and character motivation. Instead, in the absence of this layer of 'realism' the screenwriters are forced to resort to a number of overused contrivances in order to generate audience sympathy. Moreover, these are never successfully integrated into the narrative. For example, Griffin's wife frequently complains that he does not spend enough time at home (an issue which the film fails to pursue), and the first attempt upon Griffin's life also places his son in danger (a pointless gimmick, but worth three hankies at least).

The failure to generate audience interest is traceable, as well, to the filmmakers' inability to properly define the characters in terms of a given locale, or to suggest how a given environment contributes to the definition of a character. It might be, as one Montreal critic has remarked, that the film's location photography provides a pleasant change from the CBC's Toronto soundstages. But the location shooting never rises above providing the audience with a chance to engage in an I-know-that-place practice. As well, the location shooting contributes nothing to the feeling or atmosphere of the film. The location photography, and whatever 'realism' that may accompany it, is purely pragmatic: the film is shot in working-class Montreal districts because that is where the story takes place.

It might be contended that the combination of Richard Leiterman's relatively high-key, dingy lighting and the working-class, nighttime locations makes obvious contributions to the feeling of the film as a gangster film. This is only partially true. Firstly, there is little *raison d'être*, and certainly nothing stylistically purposeful, in Leiterman's interior, nighttime cinematography that could contribute to the feeling of any scene. Again, the issue appears to be simple pragmatism: the scenes are lit to conform to the locations and times of day. Secondly, this is exactly the kind of sloppy, alternately dingy and indiscriminately lit cinematography that one finds in most of the films that Leiterman has photographed.

And Then You Die marks the English-language feature film debut for director Francis Mankiewicz, and one might have expected a more auspicious beginning. But it is difficult to lay blame in this case. Granted that Mankiewicz might not have

felt at ease with the type of story he was telling, or the environment in which it is set. The problems with the script, and there are several, could not have made his task any easier. In addition, following a test screening in April 1987, the film underwent a major re-edit. Thus, it is impossible to speculate about Mankiewicz's original intentions. To the director's credit, the acting, at least, is often inspired. In particular, Dobson's performance as a consummate capitalist/gangster whose ego prevents him from seeing the impending chaos that has suddenly surrounded him, are memorable.

The overriding impression of **And Then You Die** is one of wasted effort. Consider the following. The initial problematic in the film, the animosity that McGrath feels towards Griffin and, as a result of this, McGrath's efforts to apprehend Griffin, creates a series of enigmas which the audience assumes that the film will eventually answer. For example, will Griffin be arrested? What mistakes will he make that will allow him to be arrested? Why is McGrath so obsessed with Griffin? It is questions such as these that the first half of the film sets-up and then dangles as a series of lures. And it is around these questions that the most intriguing relationship in the film, McGrath and Griffin, is predicated, and upon which McGrath's whole psychology is based.

These enigmas however, are not incorporated into the latter half of the film, the half in which Griffin's 'empire' unravels, the half in which these questions would appear to be closest to being answered. In the end, instead of an interesting psychological interplay between two antagonistic characters, one is left with a relationship whose exploration has been evaded, whose set-up has been wasted, and whose problematic, in retrospect, appears to have been nothing but forced. Had this occurred in **Edwin Alonzo Boyd**, such a set of circumstances might have accorded well with the open-ended nature of the film, but in a classical film such as **And Then You Die** the payoff for the audience is at a different level. And the result is nothing but disappointment.

Jeffrey Weigensberg •

AND THEN YOU DIE d. Francis Mankiewicz p. Brian McKenna sc. Wayne Grigsby. Alun Hibbert d.o.p. Richard Leiterman, c.s.c. assoc. p. Harris Verge exec. p. Bernard Zukerman film eds. Gordon McClellan, Alfonso Peccia sd. ed. Kevin Townshend casting Gail Carr art d. Miriam Wihak cost. des. Chris Drake cam. op. Andrew Binnington program consultants det. sgt. Kevin McGarr, Dan Burke asst. d. Howard Barish story ed. John Buell orig. m. Marty Simon unit man. Ginette Bertrand loc. man. Patty Lavoie cont. Wilma Alexander cam assists Kemp Archibald, Bill Stunden gaffer Eric Harris, Tom McMonigle, David Dool sd. rec. Gerry King boom Brian Newby asst. film. ed. Chantal Bowen effects ed. Steve Gorman re-rec Austin Grimaldi, Dino Pigat casting asst. Jon Comerford des. co-ord Peter Razmofsky

The 1987 Gemini Awards

We all desire congratulation. To be called up in front of an assembly of your peers and told that you have done a good job is surely the emotional pinnacle of success. Money is mere consolation by comparison.

Knowing this, one must respect the growing popularity of those industry-wide festivals of self-congratulation known as awards ceremonies. When the industry in question is entertainment, however, and the awards are broadcast, something peculiar happens. The awards ceremony becomes multi-purpose. It must, of course, congratulate the entertainers. It must also be entertainment. Combining these two functions is no problem. It's the third purpose that causes trouble. This is the unspoken – if not the unspeakable – reason for the ceremony: it must be a marketing tool.

Put these three together and you have a functional *ménage à trois*. The uneasiness of the combo was amply demonstrated on December 9, when Canada's TV industry aired **The 1987 Gemini Awards**.

Outwardly the program was slick: fast-paced, strongly framed and tightly scripted. Eugene Levy and Andrea Martin, the emcees, were given some very discerning commentary nicely couched in skit formats. Levy played the role of a hockey commentator before, during and after the awards/game. He talks of low-sticking at the outset, and of the blistering pace at the "end of the first period." At the conclusion of the show, an announcer tells us it has gone eight minutes overtime. Cute. Very cute.

Martin has a memorable skit as a broadcaster covering the Reagan/Gorbachev summit, 'Live from Washington'. Waiting in front of a camera she doesn't know is rolling, she yoohoos to Barbara Frum across the street, chats with the camera-man and flosses her teeth. Just at the moment she discovers she's on the air, the floss gets stuck. Like a true CBC professional, she proceeds in the face of adversity: delivering her report with a long string of dental floss hanging out of her mouth. As gross-outs go, this is delicious.

I take my hat off to the writers of this material.

My hat stays firmly on when it comes to the awards themselves.

Although the broadcast was live from the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, this was the second evening of awards. The Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television presents awards in so many categories that only about a third of this two-hour live broadcast was really live. Clips of the acceptance speeches from the evening before (framed by appallingly tacky graphics) filled in any slow moments which might have inadver-

tently created rhythm.

This was doubly jarring. The previous night's winners had all been shot in front of the same dull curtain with the camera in the same position. They were cut in the second they started speaking and cut out as they turned away from the podium. This left the impression of a vast queue of award-winners ducking in and out of a Woolworths' photomat. Very weird.

If these clips seemed rushed, airing them ensured that the live recipients' speeches were even more rushed. There was also something contrived about them: they lacked spontaneity, and I kept wondering if the acceptances had been scripted as well as the skits. As more and more speakers made reference to the shortage of time, I began to realize that the nominees had been allotted very little, and warned to prepare. Dinah Christie, accepting her award for Best Performance by a Lead Actress in a Continuing Comedy Series, gave it away: "I have between 20 and 30 seconds so I won't waste any time."

Between 20 and 30 seconds in which to be surprised, humbled, gracious, modest, thankful and as star-like as possible!

This is joke. These people have not been well and truly congratulated. They have been made to jump through hoops for the sake of the industry.

The exception, an ironic one, was Leslie Nielsen's eloquent and very moving tribute to Lorne Greene who was given the Earl Grey Award for distinguished achievement. Posthumously.

You will gather that I think the creators of this ceremony have erred in trying to make it too much of a marketing tool. I do. Yet it *was* a successful, marketing tool. Having seen the incandescent Kate Nelligan eclipsed by the astonishing Victoria Snow, I will not risk missing **Daughters of the Country** for which she won Best Actress in a Drama or Mini-Series. Apart from any other consideration, the woman has a jawline to inspire symphonies.

Similarly, I've been alerted to **Heaven on Earth**. Its lead, R.H. Thompson, lost out as Best Actor in a Drama or Mini-Series to the preposterous Booth Savage. Its writers, Margaret Atwood and Peter Pearson, were beaten for Best Writing for a Dramatic Program of Mini-Series by Sharon Riis (**Daughters of the Country**). No matter, I'll be glued to my set.

Night Heat received the award for Best Dramatic Series and, very deservedly, the TV Guide Award for Most Popular Program. One does not argue with arithmetic.

What can I tell you? I'm sold. We have superb actors in this country. We are making some great TV.

Now if only we could master the delicate art of congratulation...

Merv Walker •

p. David Acomba d. Ron Maraska m. dir. Dominic Troiano lighting dir. Ross Viner tech. p. Ray Beley.