Russell Stephens' Regeneration

I n 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 satirises scientific utopianism, it also investigates the nature and significance of the image. And although Regeneration stumbles occasionally, it does present, 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 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 explicit 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, articulately video camera (Clearly, this regeneration requires some technical adjustments by the re-generated).

Revealing his achievement to a journalist, and lost in fantasies of fame and glory (smoke, a glass, the Letter from Moscow), the professor soon encounters unforeseen problems: thousands send snapshots to have loved ones or pets brought back; rabid crowds flock to see the 'living ghost'; Charles Dickens (one of those high-flown of Elves (Stephens' sly comment on the domination of American images in Canadian culture): a corporate crackdown is instigated by Mr. Bright in company which, after learning of his spectacular violation of policy, wants its money back – with interest. Discovery Park's board of directors decides to 'term' Bright, including his character'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 Hennelly with a chilling Kubrickian blend of venality, power, and refined madness), wants to use the professor's findings to prevent his own death. When his sooges, stealing B's research, fail to generate him from an old 8 X 10 glossy, Funk calls for the capture of Professor B. It is evident from these simple facts 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 from out of the film's own set of idiosyncratic, dysfunctional, 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 up in scrap yards, and doors won't always open. When you add human fallibility, self-delusion (when B talks of regenerating whole civilizations from mere fragments), Bright sees 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 portraits). The film's 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 final shot 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 actually a re-generated image trapped in an image-making device; a camera. These conquests of fantasy, and satire, do not airily give the film an image-making self-reflexive dimension.

Within the delicate fairy-tale artifice of Regeneration, then, are found Stephens' strengths and weaknesses as a director. These artifacts permit him to play more freely with ideas and images, but some of the film's important structure to groan under the weight of the intellecutal superstructure upon it. Moreover, his film is hurt by John Anderton's script: his 'idiot savant' text of artefacts, unconvincing performance as Professor B, for it often impedes Regeneration's tone and rhythm. Some hackneyed effects might help either. Nevertheless, Regeneration is generally well-written (there are some howlers, however), competently shot (several images are generally amusing, and, indeed, quite funny), and, interrleptually energetic, and, ultimately, a satisfying first film.

Tom McSorley

Francis Mankiewicz's And Then You Die

T he 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 Life and Time (1966) 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 betrayed by detective James McGrath (R.H. Thompson), apparently the only cop on the force whom Griffin cannot buy.

Since Griffin's empire is foundational to 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 signs 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 its collapse). The size and intricacy of Griffin's empire (evident even from the publicity release) is loosely implied rather than demonstrated. This is a tactical error on the part of the screenwriters (Wayne Grigby and Alan Hibbert). Since Griffin's empire is fundamental to character motivation – it is what Griffin...
desires to extend and what others desire to co-opt or eliminate – the audience must intuit the expected or unanticipated, 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 this, the second attempt upon Griffin’s life places his son in danger (a pointless gimmick, but worth three hangkies at least).

The failure to co-opt or eliminate the audience seems to have been nothing but forced. 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 allowed very little, and warned to prepare. Dinah Kristie, accepting her award for Best Actress in a Leading Role 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. Before this, I had no idea in which to be surprised, humble, gracious, modest, thankful and as star-like as possible!”

This is jive. These people have not been told to be 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 Lorre Greene who was given the Earl Grey Award for distinguished achievement posthumously.

You will gather that I think the creation of laughter limits itself to a successful, and 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 Kealene Elliott illusion 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 Savers. Its writers, Margaret Atwood and Peter Pearson, were beaten for Best Writing for a Dramatic Program or Mini-Series by Sharon Riss (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 congratulating.