

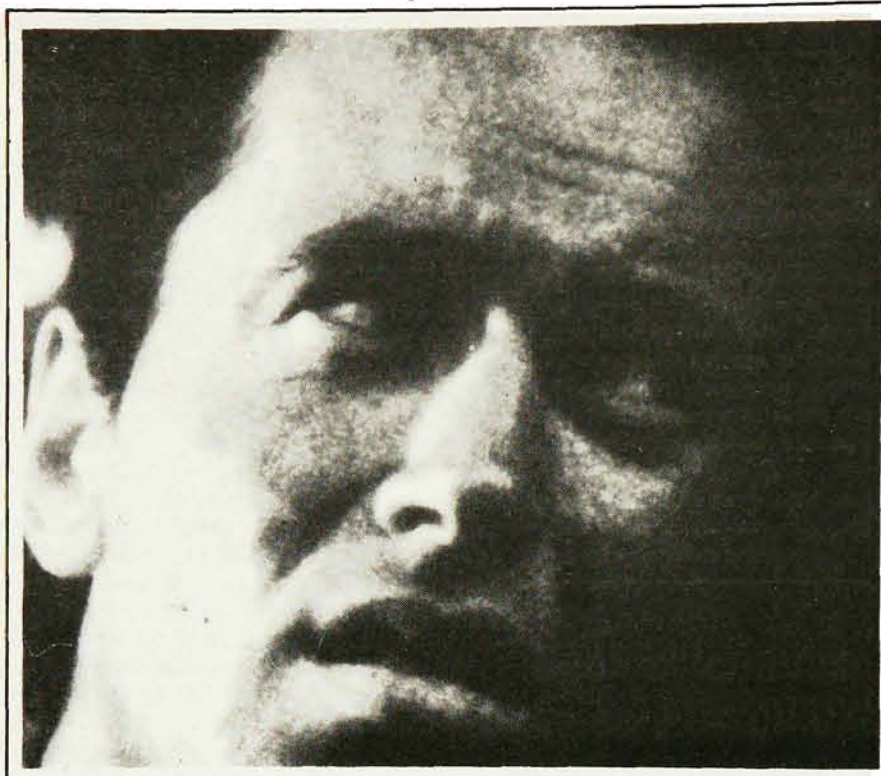
Perry Mark Stratyckuk's
Savannah Electric

There's never been much room (or need) in Canadian culture for the conception of alternative worlds. Chiefly a nation of naturalists and documentarists, Canadians are more likely to put their arts in the service of what is than to allow them to ponder what might be. As such, fantasy and science fiction are relatively anomalous genres in Canadian fiction and filmmaking (David Cronenberg comprising a classically rule-proving exception), and have not developed even the renegade literary status they enjoy in countries like Britain, Japan, the U.S.S.R. and the United States.

Interestingly, those few examples of Canadian science fiction that do exist offer ironic testimony as to why the genre just doesn't come naturally to corporeally-centred Canucks. If this fine fictional hair can be split, there appear to be two identifiable strands of Canadian SF: first there are the inevitable, commercially-generated products of imitation – those films, (such as *Defcon-4* or *The Last Chase*, or a TV series like *Starlost*), which by their very awkwardness – and commercial failure, demonstrate the genre's (ahem) alien status in terms of predominant Canadian fictional tendencies.

Then there are those films, like Cronenberg's and Perry Mark Stratyckuk's *Savannah Electric*, which mobilize the generic conventions of SF to cast some perennial and deep-seated Canadian cultural concerns in a new light. If the dominant strains of Canadian cultural practice have been thematically (indeed obsessively) drawn to a condition of profound alienation – be it individual, social, psychological, political or sexual – this kind of film permits the expression of this alienation to shift from the level of the literal (or at least naturalistic) to the metaphoric. Commercially viable and internationally celebrated as they are, the thematic concerns of the films of Cronenberg, with their constant and obsessive return to the metaphoric site of the mind's separation from the body, couldn't be more Canadian. In the generic confines of science fiction and horror, Cronenberg has found as inexhaustibly fertile cinematic discourse for the expression of the same, kind of (if slightly more extreme) alienation that has haunted practically the entire history of postwar Canadian feature filmmaking.

(Not that this is without precedent. Significantly enough, one of the most highly-awarded Canadian films ever, the 1960 'speculative documentary' *Universe*, which introduced model anima-



• Documenting alienation in science fiction *Savannah*

tion techniques that would become instrumental to the realization of films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Star Wars*, ventured to the heavens only to find cosmic vindication of our national inferiority complex. Consider Peter Morris's description in *The Film Companion*: "...this literally awe-inspiring film makes extraordinary use of animation to present an image of the universe and humanity's insignificance in the face of it." (pp. 304-4) No wonder Canadians have avoided the potential for interplanetary frontierism offered by speculative fictional forms: why travel to other planets for proof of our ultimate puniness?.

Like Cronenberg, though with radically different formal means and interests, Winnipeg's Perry Mark Stratyckuk has found in certain SF conventions a profoundly versatile medium for the representation of certain dyed-in-the-flannel Canadian concerns. A post-apocalyptic survival fable (*à la A Boy and His Dog*, *Defcon-4*, *Le Dernier combat*, *Planet of the Apes*, *Road Warrior* and *Stalker*, to name a select few), Stratyckuk's film occupies a SF sub-genre that usually offers two metaphoric alternatives: the post-apocalyptic world as an opportunity for the reconstruction of a better society from scratch, or the deterministic presentation of that world as a logical but extreme projection of contemporary social ills onto a future canvas. Following the latter route, the decidedly Canadian *Savannah Electric* conjures a future world where certain negative national characteristics have run rather amok. In fascinating ways, it suggests the future – oppressive and industrial – as Don Shebib might once have imagined it.

Made for a miniscule \$30,000, and set in an indeterminate future of equal economic and ecological blight (with prairie dunes evoking global drought),

when men labour under machine rule on the production of life-sustaining chemicals, *Savannah Electric* can be even more precisely situated in terms of SF sub-genres. The story of one drone's rebellion against the omnipotent rule of a computer called The Benefactor (who, significantly enough, is also the film's narrator), Stratyckuk's film is firmly of the assertion-of-individual-will type. In this popular, usually cautionary strain of speculative literature and film, an individual (or group of individuals) rises up against a conformist, totalitarian regime. Within generic parameters, that regime can be represented by people (the crypto-fascist regimes of 1984, *Things to Come* and *Metropolis*), aliens (the *Star Wars* trilogy, *War of the Worlds*, the V TV series), machines (though usually, as in *Westworld*, *Colossus: The Forbin Project* or *2001: A Space Odyssey* it's machines doing the revolting), or any number of assorted significant Others (*Planet of the Apes* and its successors). In the political terms these films set, the greatest threat faced by contemporary society is the threat to individualism and free will, and the films present a dramatic assertion of individual free will in a world which has suppressed it. So does *Savannah Electric*: inspired by a fellow 'Drone' who has lost his life in an attempt to escape the computer's control, another drone 'goes renegade' and is pursued into the desert by a human bounty hunter dispatched by the none-too-happy Benefactor.

In these human rebellion SF films, the degree of faith in free will as a revolutionary force is usually expressed in the outcome of the revolt itself: in 1984, the hero's poetic insurrection is quashed like so much fudge, in the *Star Wars* trilogy the evil regime is triumphantly dumped. In *Savannah Electric* the as-

sertion of individualism in a totalitarian context is presented as a minor but portentous victory: while the Benefactor remains in firm control at film's end (he's still narrating, after all), he interprets even this small, personal gesture of revolt as a potentially contagious one: with a worldweary (and decidedly human) sigh, he acknowledges that he's presided over the beginning of his own demise. There will be more renegades.

Canadian as this measured, hesitant conclusion may be (this has never been a nation comfortable with the idea of revolt – an American film would have relished the spectacle of The Benefactor's final defeat), it is not the only aspect of *Savannah Electric* that surrenders a certain cultural particularity. Alternating constantly between confined, industrial settings or expansive, establishing long shots (highlighted by Stratyckuk's brilliant convincing miniature models), the film seems actually more interested in documenting oppression than revolt against it. Although the opening chase sequence (in which the bounty hunter tracks a renegade to an abandoned farmhouse) is an exquisitely rendered (if a tad overlong), bargain basement homage to Sergio Leone, it's actually the documentation of drudgery which is *Savannah Electric*'s strongest suit.

Stratyckuk's rendering of The Benefactor's steam-choked chemical plant, with its hissing valves, droidlike Drones and omnipresent thugs, is easily the film's most convincingly conceptualized element. Reminiscent of David Lynch's epochal confections in *Dune*, Stratyckuk's desert-bound chemical factory is like a 19th century sweatshop chugging away in a bleak, distant future. And while the presentation of character would barely qualify as minimal (no doubt due to the dramatically debilitating budgetary necessity of using post-synched sound), the reasons for revolt are never less than obvious: drone life is vividly presented as a cycle of exhausting labour and electronically-induced narcosis, so that while our revolutionary hero coheres as a psychological presence, his function as a moral and political force is perfectly clear. Besides, the revolt itself seems of less interest to the film than the documentation of the conditions that necessitate it. If there's any aspect of *Savannah Electric* that qualifies it as Canuck SF, this is it: not only is it too grounded in political practicality to indulge cathartic fantasies of full-scale revolt and social upheaval, it has a documentarist's fascination with the minutiae of social and behavioural process: strange as it seems, it qualifies as sort of SF *vérité*.

But realistically, it is precisely this refusal to indulge the more kinetic conventions of SF that will probably ensure low visibility for *Savannah Electric*. Lean on plot and psychology, paced with a Tarkovskian fidelity to *ennui* and indecision, Stratyckuk's film is both unlikely to please mainstream SF zealots (who will find it deadly, short-on-FX bore), and unlikely to reach those artier

types most likely to applaud its ambitious, homemade modernism. And frankly, it is too long. Given the slight and ultimately vague nature of *Savannah Electric's* political campaign (the assertion of individual will making for pretty thin manifesto material), not even Stratyckuk's formidable formal talents justify the film's 80-odd minute running time. (It would have made one amazing short).

At this moment, *Savannah Electric* is most richly regarded as a fascinating footnote to the search for cultural specificity that has faced English-Canadian filmmakers since foreign films first found a home on our domestic screens. Principally and most successfully, it is a generic exercise which rather audaciously borrows a more or less alien cultural form – and scales it to suit the domestic sensibility. For now, that is, it is of primary interest in terms of its position within the ongoing project of developing indigenously Canadian forms of popular culture. In the future, I hope it will be that and something more. I hope it will be remembered as the first feature made by an extraordinary intelligent and innovative Canadian filmmaker.

Geoff Pevere ●

SAVANNAH ELECTRIC p./d./d.o.p./ed. Perry Mark Stratyckuk orig. m. comp. and perf. by Tom Paterson add. m. Perry Stratyckuk rerec. Chris McPherson ward. Catherine Stratyckuk mattes and miniatures Destiné Films animated titles and post prod. fx. Audience West pyrotechnics Shawn Wilson, Dave Peter, Steve Hegyi video fx Keith McKenzie, Visual Marketing Systems prod. asst. Peter McDonald, Donald Stratyckuk m. rec. Chris McPherson, Wayne Finucan Productions credits Steven Rosenberg lab services Mid-Can Labs Inc. neg. cutting Dawna Dobbs l.p. Dean Beckman, Jack Urbanski, Peter McDonald, Donald Stratyckuk, Jack Salzberg, Dave Hologrosky, Armand Baptist, Christopher Sigurdson, Ann Hodges. The Producer wishes to thank: The National Film Board of Canada, J. D. "Del" Martin, Coleen Ryan, CP Rail, William Kachur, Keith Gans. Produced with the assistance of The Manitoba Arts Council. running time 78min colour 16mm distrib North American Releasing Inc. (604) 925-2565.

Paul Lynch's *Blindside*

Paul Lynch has spent the last decade directing genre exercises. In *Blindside* he attempts to return to the low-key style that characterized his early films, *The Hard Part Begins* and *Blood and Guts*. Unfortunately for Lynch and his debuting writer Richard Beattie, it takes more than a complex story line, stark cinematography and morally ambiguous characters to make a film noir.

This is one of those stories in which a professional voyeur sees too much and becomes involved in a conspiracy. It specifically descends from *Rear Win-*

dow by way of *Blow-Up* and *The Conversation*. It borrows rather too much from the latter, but shows little of the brilliance of Hitchcock, Antonioni or Coppola.

Penfield Gruber (Harvey Keitel) was once a leading behavioral scientist and an expert in surveillance techniques. Then his wife Janine killed herself, and he dropped out. Now he owns a run-down motel on the Toronto lakeshore. His clients consist of aspiring exotic dancers, deadbeat musicians, Elvis Presley impersonators and would-be gigolos. Then, a pair of hoods knock on his door.

Peters (Sam Malkin) wants Gruber to spy on a recent arrival at the motel, William Freelong (Michael Rudder). To convince Gruber, Peters' muscleman, Collinson (Kenneth McGregor), threatens to smash his face and torch the motel. Gruber is already suspicious of Freelong, and reluctantly agrees.

While planting listening devices in the room next to Freelong's, Gruber hears something from the apartment on the other side, which he also decides to bug. He soon discovers a connection between Gilchrist (Durango Coy), his girlfriend Julie (Lori Hallier), and the shipment of heroin Freelong and his gang ripped-off Peters' boss, Hawk.

By this point the audience should be thoroughly involved with the film, but *Blindside* remains curiously remote in tone. Lynch seems to be unsure of how to handle his main character; unlike the undone voyeurs played by James Stewart, David Hemmings or Gene Hackman, Gruber is just not interesting as a person.

Harvey Keitel has always been at his best as an actor when called upon to play men who desperately try to control their natural propensity to violence, but who eventually blow up. This slow burn is quite different from the more flashy explosions of Robert De Niro, (which may explain why Keitel has not achieved his friend's stardom), but Keitel's style works well for guilt-obsessed figures he played in Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets*, James Toback's *Fingers* and his role as the censorious detective in Nicholas Roeg's *Bad Timing*. In *Blindside*, however, Keitel holds himself in to such a degree that he becomes colourless.

Lynch also fudges other aspects of the film. Though considerable attention is paid to the technology of Gruber's surveillance equipment, his video cameras are seen to pan, when they have been explicitly shown earlier to be stationary. What is more surprising is the director's decision to downplay any exploitation of the Toronto atmosphere, in contrast to the attention to detail he used to show.

Because the audience doesn't care about Gruber as a person, there is no interest in his guilt feelings. Guilt is why he involves himself with Julie, who reminds him of Janine, his wife – the tryst between them in an apartment over a bookstore, brought groans and guffaws

from the sparse audience I saw the film with. Gruber's other relationship, with Adele (Lolita David), the aspiring exotic dancer, is handled better, but fails to convince, although their big scene together, huddling in a car while a gunfight takes place some 50 feet away, is the one place where the noir atmosphere is successfully achieved.

Michael Rudder's portrayal of the wired Freelong is the only really lively character in the film, with his continuing rap about the need for more "ordinance", bizarre non sequiturs ("they're used to gun control in this country"), and delight in shootouts. These are shot in clichéd Peckinpah slow motion – one's main reaction to this is to observe how nicely Dwayne McLean's stunt team takes its falls. What can one say, though, about the would-be Great Canadian Gangster, whose greatest ambition is to throw a brick off the Eiffel Tower?

If *Blindside* fails, it is clearly because Paul Lynch does not manage the busy plots into a coherent whole; at one point Gruber has to write the connecting threads down, so as to make sense. Later, Gruber visits a former colleague who is conducting a sleep study on a patient that looks remarkably like torture. The scene is a piece of scientific black humor worthy of Cronenberg; it is unnerving and it has energy. It also has little to do with the rest of *Blindside*.

J. Paul Costabile ●

BLINDSIDE d. Paul Lynch p. Peter Simpson co-p. Ray Sager assoc. p. Ilana Frank asst. d. David Robertson (1st), Sam Mahony (2nd), Martha Bean (3rd) prod. man. Robert Wertheimer prod. co-ord Fran Solomon asst. to p. Jane Schmelzer sc. Richard Beattie sc. sup. Diane Parsons d.o.p. Rene Ohashi focus puller John Hobson 2nd asst. cam. David Parkins cam. trainee Cudah Andarawewa stills Ben Mark Buchanan sd. ed. Nick Rotundo assts Alastair Gray, Stephen Lawrence asst ed. Alastair Gray app. ed. Kerry Simpson sd. mix. John McGill boom Jack Buchanan sd. ed. Nick Rotundo assts Alastair Gray, Anthony D'Andrea, Shan Barr Foley Peter McBurnie re-rec Film House Group mix. Tony van den Akker, Marvin Burns art d. rick Roberts assts Catherine Basaraba art dept. co-ord. Sandy Kybartas set dec. Alan Fellows set dresser Chery Junkin, Linda Del Rosario asst set dresser Bob Cross set construct. Hot Sets construct. Man. John Bankson prop mast. Emil Glassbourg asst. Woody Stewart, Paul Haigh, Kim Stitt carp. Ted Samuels cost des. Nada Healy assts Alan St. Germain, Aline gilmore make-up Nancy Howe hair Debi Drennan art dept. trainee Ken Watkins story board artist Robert Ballentine gaffer Maris Hansons best boy Cactus gen. Eldie Beson ele. Dave Moxness key grip Brian Kuchera grip Dee Embree asst. Mike Pendola, Mike Corrigan, Blake Ballentine m. Paul J. Zaza choreography Kelly Robinson spfx Tedd Ross min. and explosions William Lishman and Assoc. Ltd. Video Unit co-ord Karen Pidgurski segment co-ord Paul French op. Terry Gallie cam. op. Jan Zuchlinski playback Video Options stunt. co-ord Dwayne McLean stunt performers Anton Tyukodi, Larry McLean, Randy Kamula, Larry Hoson, John Stoneham loc. scout John Board loc. asst. Woody Sidarous, Lillit "Hank" Williams, Michael Curran, David Flaherty post. prod. sup. Suzanne Colvin prod. acc. Joyce Caveen bookkeeper Susan Stewart prod. assts. Paul Smith, Andrea McCabe prod. office assts. Paul Persofsky prod. receipt. Robin Wardop craft service Debra Earhardt, Michelle Milner, Tonby Robinson transport co-ord Dan Dunlop drivers Bill Hoddinott, Allan P. Mestel, James Am Smith, Mark Moore, Steve LaFleur unit pub. Karen Pidgurski cast d. Media Casting/Lucinda Sill, C. D. C. extra casting Film Extras Services/Peter Lavender equip. rental Lightsource Inc. lab. Film House titles and opt Film Opticals Prod Co. Norstar Entertainment in association with Telefilm Canada, CFCN Communications Ltd., British Columbia Television, TBA Films S. A. colour 35mm running time 102 min. dist. Norstar Releasing.

Stavros C. Stravides' *God Rides a Harley*

Stavros C. Stravides's excellent independent documentary, *God Rides a Harley* (launched at Montreal's World Film Festival), rolls us into a world of ex-motorcycle outlaws who, by some miracle, met with God on the highway of the damned – and were transformed by the encounter. The bikers in the film believe they have been saved, and they embrace their saviour.

However the people who appear in *God Rides a Harley* don't come across as intolerably smug, self-congratulatory convertoids.

These people are not country singers whose careers went on the skids, or failed fast-food entrepreneurs, taken to hitting the bottle. The bikers have been around. They have seen much dirt – in the world, in other people, in themselves. Their experience of – and admission to – real heavy-duty sinfulness ironically gives them a certain moral authority. They seem to have a right to talk about their salvation, because they lived for years on the edge of hell.

For instance, one of the bikers describes a flaming night when an enemy pulled a knife, lurched toward him, and stabbed him in the groin. The biker didn't feel anything. He stood up, and like a super-maniac in a slasher movie, he kept going, loaded with energy, ready to kill his assailant. His 24-hour-a-day "bloodlust," the biker tells us, could render him oblivious to terror and pain.

Another motorcyclist jokes that wanting another round of violence was like wanting "another cookie." Drugged and drunken bar fights were commonplace. Vendettas were frequent. We hear one biker confess that if he had been with his pretty, blonde wife in the days when she had sex, as she tells the camera, "with a lot of men," he would have castrated some of them. Another guy admits that he once actually hired someone to murder his wife – although he cancelled the contract before it was fulfilled. The outlaw level of morality was exemplified by one biker's favorite way of grossing-out his buddies. He would stick his face into a toilet and drink all the water.

Then something came riding toward each of the motorcyclists. One biker saw a vision of "God's Death Angel" about to kill him. All of them experienced themselves as loathsome creatures wallowing in the devil's pit. They hungered to drag themselves out, and they felt the lightning bolts of grace. These days, having renounced drugs, rumbles, bestial sex, and all other ultra-cheap thrills, they ride their motorcycles to spread the "beauty of The Word" to others like them. Theirs