

FILM REVIEWS

Monkeys in the Attic

A movie critic hates to be caught with the wrong expression on his face when the lights go up. Have I taken this movie too seriously, or not seriously enough? That I didn't laugh — *at all* — is that because I was being too earnest, writing notes in the dark, trying to *grasp* the film? The croaks and chuckles of amusement around me — were they the responses of appropriately attuned sensibilities, relaxing to the rhythms of this freaked-out fantasia, rocking to and fro with its abrupt shifts and discontinuities, its bizarre juxtapositions of tone? In finding the film funny, pretty continuously funny, were they reacting spasmodically to a series of spasms, or were they responding to a coherent comic vision of experience that spoke to their condition?

Monkeys in the Attic: one night in a house inhabited by four people. Two of them, Wanda and Eric, are spaced out; one of them, Elaine, is freaking out; the fourth, Frederick, is angry, bewildered, alternately bullying Elaine, appealing to her, and trying to control her. Nothing in the movie suggests that the characters have any existence outside it. They have no history, no palpable connections with a social milieu. No account is offered of what they do, who they are, why they live together, or how they acquired such expensive furniture. They are creatures of the imaginations of Morley Markson and John Palmer, conjured up to perform in a fantasia.

Elaine's is the central consciousness. Wanda and Eric clown, grimace, cavort, and chase each other in antic sexuality (Eric persistently puncturing their games, bringing Wanda down from her whimsies, a recurring symbolic *coitus interruptus*). Elaine wanders through the house looking distraught and hysterical, gulping Courvoisier and pills, and the film repeatedly renders her inner experience (never anyone else's) as a maddening, terrorizing nightmare, in which Wanda and Eric oppress her with their surrealistic freakishness, their acting-out of psychic anarchy, and Frederick oppresses her with his domineering, Super-Egotistical hostility. Frederick claims to love her and to be concerned about her, but the pattern of his behaviour contradicts this claim — a classic schizogenic manoeuvre.

Let's drive Elaine crazy? Or does Elaine only experience their behaviour as a conspiracy to torment her because

she is already crazy? Are Wanda and Eric quite happily doing their own zany thing, radically liberated from conventional consciousness? Or are they, too (especially Wanda) on the verge of hysterical collapse, distracted from distraction by distraction? Elaine furiously accuses Wanda of "acting all the time . . . being a crazy fool", to which Wanda responds with a burst of anguish. Certainly, to this viewer, anguish and desperation seemed to be the propulsion behind most of the frantic goings-on.

And I remember Morley's earlier film, **Zero the Fool**, in which three tense and anxious people were propelled into spasms of hysteria by a fourth person — Morley himself, behind the camera. In that movie the cinematic mode was B & W *cinéma vérité*, catch-as-you-can-while-it's-going-on. There were scenes of all-too-real pain, as the participants (I won't say 'actors') begged Morley, the demonic enchanter, to release them, to turn off the X-ray machine. The suffering was wrenched out in authentic displays of anguish on real faces.

In **Monkeys** there is a different kind of contrivance. Instead of extorting the overflow of craziness from real people (in a travesty of encounter therapy) and then recording it, he gets his actors to *imitate* craziness, in a crazy environment, crazily photographed. The camera is constantly peering up stairwells, leering into mirrors, coming at people around corners, from above, below, between. Angles shift and reel, light glares, fades, shimmers. The dissolve is the essential linking device in the film's repertoire; shots blend and blur; disparate events and moments in time are

Jess Walton



made to interpenetrate and overlap, breaking down the solidity of fact into the fluidity of impressions. The subjectivity of vision established in this way seems to coincide more or less with Elaine's psychic turmoil. But, as a mode of presentation, it encompasses scenes and actions which have no connection with her. Only the scenes involving Frederick are exempt from this stylization. With what seems like a deliberate consistency, Frederick is shown with a distance and objectivity that match the unsympathetic harshness of his emotional presence.

And beyond this cinematic hot-housing, so different from **Zero the Fool**, there is the attempt, equally different, to render hysteria from the inside. By certain conventional cinematic signs we are asked to receive considerable portions of this bizarre concoction as representing Elaine's half-doped blend of memory, dream and fantasy. Water cascades over Niagara Falls, the figures of the other three characters loom and writhe and make menacing speeches at her, and cries and whispers echo in the gloom.

Occasionally the characters speak to each other in what seem like the accents of 'normal' consciousness. From such moments a perspective is fleetingly established from which to get a fix on the more eccentric behaviour. But the acting in such moments is crudely unconvincing, and the hint of genuine and coherent emotional lives thoroughly implausible. For the 'world' conjured up by Markson and Palmer (remember that long night-in-a-madhouse play of Palmer's, **The End**?) has no connection with any of the modes in which life is actually experienced. Nobody's life ever looked like the circus created in **Monkeys**, or (more important, since I'm not insisting on any narrow criterion of 'realism') ever *felt like it* from the inside either. In other words, the movie doesn't hold a mirror up to human experience, however distorting, from whatever angle, but reflects only itself. Its mirrors — the film is full of mirrors — only bounce back and forth reflections of a self-contained, and hence arbitrary, hence irrelevant, craziness.

Most of the people at the screening I attended found it funny, i.e. they made sounds expressive of amusement. But I ask again, as I did at the beginning, were they laughing at what came to them as a comic vision of life, or only at a series

of random incongruities?

It remains to mention the other main ingredient of the film's recipe, introduced about half way through the cooking time, and thereafter sprinkled very liberally. More or less accidentally Elaine orders a pizza, and when the delivery boy arrives with it he finds himself drawn into the bewildering maelstrom that has been going on half the night. All four characters alternately seduce and spurn him, undress him, push him into the bath, throw him downstairs, tip him (and all his pizzas) into the pool, squirm over him, abuse, wheedle, and generally disorient him. Through it all he hangs on in the hope of at least one simple fuck, without any fixin's.

The audience seemed to identify eagerly with this relatively pedestrian consciousness, and to enjoy the TV sit-com humour of a series of dumb-delivery-boy-meets-(horny)-Gracie-Allen jokes. Perhaps this should be taken as an important clue. The humour extracted from the pizza boy is simple stuff, and essentially derived from TV comedy. Markson hasn't introduced a 'normal' consciousness as a perspective from which to view the freaks, but a goofy dope, a Gomer Pyle — in other words, another freak. So the artificial world remains unbroken.

Monkeys is the kind of film which asks to be compared with other films. To stack it up against the big ones: it falls between the intense dramatization of madness by Bergman, who would rely far more on his actors' ability to project complex feeling, and the surreal fantasia of Buñuel, whose anarchic dreams in *Discreet Charm* are so deadpan that we don't recognize them as dreams until someone wakes up from them. These are mountainous heights to fall between, and where Morley lands is somewhere in the vicinity of Fellini. **Monkeys** is an extravagantly good-looking film, full of energy and inventiveness exerted by a talent which perhaps overspends itself on a mirage.

—Robert Fothergill

Only God Knows

In the beginning was the Idea.

Something started the ball rolling. Perhaps it was the old joke: did you hear the one about the priest, the minister and the rabbi...? Perhaps it was simply the title, an innocent expression, "only God knows".



Paul Hecht, John Beck and Gordon Pinsent

All of which sounds like an ad man's dream; great stuff for a publicity campaign (and they've certainly made the best of it). But for a film? It must have been something a little more promising. Perhaps it was the plotline: three men of the cloth steal two hundred thousand dollars from the Mafia, armed only with the best of intentions and the clearest of consciences. Call it comedy. Well, whatever the inspiration, **Only God Knows** probably was once a great idea. Unfortunately, there's a fairly long route between a great idea and a great or even good film. Someone (was it producer Larry Dane, writer Haskell Gray or director Peter Pearson?) evidently misjudged the distance.

It's a pleasant enough film, but between the tired old Hollywood sight gags, the many and god-awful double entendres and the superficiality of a world where (for example) a man's ability to pronounce Hanukkah properly is sufficient proof that he's not anti-Semitic, there's very little which rises above the level of the Sacred and the Inane. An irreverent story needs an irreverent hand in the telling. Instead, **Only God Knows** plays everything for the easy but instantly forgettable laugh (very much like a television sitcom) and as a result, one and all involved are quickly reduced to mildly amusing and rather witless caricatures. It's no credit to the Holy Trinity that they finally *outfool* the Mafia.

As they're presented, Father Hagan (Gordon Pinsent), Reverend Norman (Jack Beck) and Rabbi Sherman (Paul Hecht) are effectively crooks (and lucky crooks, at that) who happen, quite incidentally, to be members of the

clergy. They launch their caper on the shallowest of rationalizations, and although their act is of desperation, they themselves are hardly desperate men. There's the gentle Father, the head of an impressive Church and yet the mastermind and driving force behind a scheme borne in confessional. And there's the hip young Reverend, blue jeans cowboy boots and all, who quotes the Bible with tongue-in-check to those in his flock who would rather be seduced than saved. Not to forget the good Rabbi, the most compassionate of the three, and a man facing divorce as the reward for his dedication.

Together, they run an interfaith drug rehabilitation centre, *Junkhouse*, and face dispossession along with its young inhabitants because they lack the two hundred thousand dollars needed to pay the bills. While Father Hagan mulls over the problem, the local Don (Louis Tanno), an aging gentleman with exquisite taste in wine and art, is busy coping with a bothersome conscience. In the best Mafia tradition, the two get together and an offer is made: it seems only fitting that the Don's four and a half million dollar fortune, made in the drug trade, should go to *Junkhouse* in return, of course, for absolution and entrance to Heaven. Hardly an offer to refuse (is there any other kind these days?) but unfortunately it's not made official before the old man inconveniently dies. So the God Squad must steal what's "rightfully theirs". Honourable men that they are, they'll take only the two hundred grand they need.

Although Pinsent, Beck and Hecht seem like quite an acceptable team of comedians, they're not allowed the opportunity to be convincing as clergymen. Their characters are drawn superficially, much in the spirit of "the clothes make the man"; the cassock, collar and cap serve to identify but do nothing to bring the breath of life.

So okay, it's a comedy verging (intentionally or not) towards farce, and perhaps Dane/Gray/Pearson intended the priest the minister and the rabbi simply to be an extension of that old joke. But the laughs are not any smoother or more effective for the lack of real-live characters. In fact, the film moves along at an uncomfortably ceremonial pace as the gags, including an ecumenical "drag" sequence and an improbable car chase through open fields (is this becoming the Pearson

trademark? Remember **Paperback Hero?**) are carefully contrived and then fully and forcefully exploited.

Likely as not though, someone had a great time developing **Only God Knows** from that mysterious idea. There's a hint (just a hint) of a rare and spontaneous spirit which might well have infected the entire film. But it's easy to get carried away. There are times like that; one joke leads to another and before it's all over, well. . . . Perhaps they might just be better forgotten. But God help us if there's a film to be found in every old joke.

The Visitor

So, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has yet to be convinced. All along, the powers-that-be have been reluctant to recognize Canadian films. Now that they have (at least the summer series, **Canadian Cinema** is a step in the right direction), it's obvious that they've still very little respect for the films as anything other than filler between commercials. And equally obvious that this country's film industry may have won a small battle for Corporation recognition, but they're still losing the war.

Consider **The Visitor**. Not that it was any more thoughtlessly handled than the others in the series, (in that respect, **Mon Oncle Antoine** suffered much more) but this was, in effect, the film's "first-run" showing east of the Rockies. It deserved better.

The Visitor is a film of moods, a chilling and fascinating study in the psychology of Time, weaving the immediate present and the carefully preserved and beautifully evoked turn-of-the-century past around a kind of Canadian Victorian romance. As the "visitor", Pia Shandel portrays a young history student whose interest in the past, specifically Calgary of the early 1900's, has ceased to be a simple matter of academics. A growing obsession drives her to spend three mid-winter weeks in an empty old mansion, all in the name of research. After a restless first night's sleep, she awakens into the strange olde world of her daydreams. Triggered by the appearance of a mysterious young man (Eric Peterson) who claims to be the master of the house in his parent's absence, the romantic reverie begins. And slowly turns into a nightmare, full of the psychological ambiguities so characteristic of the troubled world in which Paul Almond's heroines seem to find themselves.

Unlike an Almond film though, **The Visitor** remains coherent in its direction, even as its realities become increasingly

confused. Throughout, the old house is the one continuing reality and director John Wright uses it effectively, richly visualizing the warmth and atmosphere that the young woman so passionately wished to experience. (Could Wright have felt the same obsession? What better way to indulge it than to make a film.) Its imposing presence gives the film a theatrical air; the two young people, in the process of getting to know one another and adjusting to the strange situation, often work to it in the blocked movements of the stage.

In these same ponderous moments, they pass the time with some fairly contrived philosophic conversation about the meaning of life and other such related matters. Thankfully, it's offered (presumably at Wright's prompting) with a collective non-committal



Eric Peterson in "The Visitor"

shrug, as if the questions are just too weighty to be rewarded with an answer. So why worry? Wright even includes a short poem by Robert Service, **Just Think**: "... Your life is but a little beat/Within the heart of Time..." A comfortable and reassuring thought. But as irrelevant and half baked as it may seem (and perhaps it's wrong to think of it in terms of present day cynicism), the polite conversation does serve to deepen the tension, simply by delaying the inevitable. Only as the visitor becomes completely involved in this past society, and feels the coldness of the people who know nothing of her dilemma (and may not even exist outside of her imagination, there's always that unresolved uncertainty), does the tension find a final release. The visitor proves to be less than the perfect guest.

Unfortunately, the dream world of **The Visitor** is no match for the harsher dream world of commercial television. Perhaps the National Film Board was right when it, among others, voiced reservations about the successful transi-

tion from large screen to small. The transition *has* been uncomfortable, and never more than in the hands of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

— Mark Miller

About rape and recent releases

If there are any indicators of the present state of our collective consciousness as English-Canadians, surely the recent works of our artists would have to be classified as such. As a firm believer that films, whether popular or artful in design, are among the most colourful and valuable expressions of this country's culture, I also hold that the creators of film are no lesser *artists* than those who choose to apply oil paint to canvas, rather than light to celluloid.

A glance at five recent titles is almost alarming in its clarity of message. Read together, **The Hard Part Begins**, **Why Rock the Boat?**, **Only God Knows**, **Monkeys in the Attic** (a tale of exploding dreams), and **125 Rooms of Comfort** cannot fail to conjure up obvious concerns of our collective journey, circa three-quarters of the way through this century. **Comfort** was originally entitled **The Adventures of Johnny Cannuck**, and the Canadian content of the message is, as a notable criminal once used to say, perfectly clear. Especially if applied to our perplexed feature industry.

Having seen all except the last, the thematic connection one soon discovers is rape — both the mind and body fuck varieties. John Lynch's **Hard Part** foists upon our consciousness yet another tale of a Canadian loser, in the grand tradition of **Goin' Down the Road**, but missing Shebib's ballsy ambience. Bradley and McGrath are back in well-played supporting roles, but Donnelly Rhodes' fucked-over country and western singer lead is weak compared to Rip Torn's in **Payday**. As is Nancy-Belle Fuller's country belle in comparison with the lady whose voice was dubbed in for her songs. Nevertheless, the critics all flocked to praise this film with surprising enthusiasm. Cinépix is handling the distribution, on this low-budget rendering of small town Canadian life, also dealing with how country culture is being replaced by rock culture in most parts.

John Howe's **Why Rock the Boat?** is a period comedy set in the forties, but its explorations of socialism vs. capitalism, male vs. female, honesty vs. corruption, and sex vs. love are as contemporary in concern as what to do if another depression comes. Its major theme is seduction, a mild form of rape: Stu Gillard's bumbling cub reporter is being

constantly conned into the service of the above conflicting philosophies, notably by Henry Beckman's mean managing editor, Ken James' seasoned photographer, Tiiu Leek's so-so beautiful activist and Patricia Gage's sex-hungry and lovely wife characters. The latter two manage to seduce Gillard literally as well. High point in the film is our idealistic and naive young anti-hero getting drunk and unwittingly striking a great blow against the corrupt, 'free-enterprise' world of Montreal newspapers by breaking through the fears of the men and women in the newsroom and organizing the first union rally. Some of the acting is stereotypical and flat, but *Why Rock the Boat?* is unashamedly Canadian in setting and a joy to watch throughout. A warm, human comedy that should become a popular movie, it is being distributed by Astral.

Peter Pearson's *Only God Knows* received such a vicious review in our 'national newspaper,' that producer Larry Dane, whose original idea gave birth to the film, may take legal action. It's an innocuous comedy, but deserves better treatment than that. If you haven't yet heard, it's about a priest, a minister, and a rabbi who decide to rob the Mafia in order to finance a drop-in centre for young drug victims of the very same syndicate. Gordon Pinsent's priest is life-size and believable, John Beck's minister is stiff but lovable, and Paul Hecht's rabbi is a low-key version of Elliot Gould and a pleasant surprise. Their relationship comes across as honest and human, and Peter Pearson's direction is full of subtle touches, embellishing an otherwise ordinary script into a very pleasing movie. Pearson learned part of his craft in Europe, and it shows, especially on this film. The humour is there for those open to it, as are the rape related themes: the mob raping our young with drugs, and the clergy 'raping' us with religion. These are subliminal themes only, however. What makes the movie work for me is its well-constructed hilarity in parts — notably a rollicking chase sequence through fields of man-sized corn — and professionalism throughout: good acting, well-chosen locations, outstanding cinematography (Don Wilder) and successful editing. What certain critics found so objectionable, only God knows. Distribution by Canart/Queensbury.

In Morley Markson's *Monkeys in the Attic*, the dreams explode into actual rape and attempted suicide. Male and female, gay and straight, dreams and realities, clowns and tragic people, seekers and forsakers, death and life itself are played off by this very skillful direc-

tor to produce by far the best film in this group. Two couples inhabit a luxurious Toronto house and expose all their in-

wedlock by reading the stars, or the small-boy hero of Jan Kadar's *Lies My Father Told Me*, both films delayed in



Scene from "125 Rooms Of Comfort"

ner conflicts during the space of a single, eventful night. The amount of control Markson managed to infuse into his script (with John Palmer), his direction of the excellent cast, Henri Fiks' superb colour cinematography, the set design by Tony Hall and Arnaud Maggs, as well as into the beautifully tight post-production elements (both the multi-levelled soundtrack and the very creative visuals), is amazing. Jackie Burroughs' Wanda is sensational, and the rest of the cast is equally impressive. A deeply moving and alternately phenomenally funny film, it is exhilarating throughout, and is being distributed by Ambassador films.

Patrick Loubert's *125 Rooms of Comfort* also stars Jackie Burroughs, and for this reason alone I would recommend a viewing, sight unseen. Thematically, I'm told, it includes a rape, as well as transvestitism, small-town hooliganism and the demise of yet another performer, this time a rock singer who's all washed up. If that doesn't make it Canadian, it was shot in St. Thomas, Ontario by a cast and crew of youthful Toronto film enthusiasts, this last remark being in no way meant to question their professionalism. Quite often professionals lack enthusiasm; my admiration goes to the people who worked with producer Don Haig on this picture, for having retained this quality. More on this in our next issue.

Pregnancy sometimes follows rape, and another brief glance as to what the future holds turns up a surprising number of child-related themes, whether it's the heroine of Gordon Sheppard's *Eliza's Horoscope*, who's determined to choose the father of her baby out of

post-production but promised as forthcoming soon. Martin Kinch's *Me*, Peter Bryant's *The Supreme Kid*, and Murray Markowitz' *Recommendation for Mercy* (on the Stephen Truscott rape murder case — whew!) will all deal with some aspects of adolescence, one suspects, if not chronologically, at least in mental attitudes. As will George Kaczender's *Micro Blues* and Graham Parker's *Lady of the Meadow*, neither as yet in production. *The Search*, *The Fury Plot*, and *The Parasite Complex* sound as if adolescence was instrumental in coining the titles, although they're probably thematically divergent from the above group. But the upcoming Crawley Films/Japan co-production, *Child in a Prison Camp*, is very obviously about a Japanese kid who was interned by the Canadian government as an enemy of the state during the war, even though he was most likely born in this country. The ultimate rape.

Omissions? Trevor Wallace and Gerry Arbeid produce pictures in this country, but their themes have nothing to do with Canada. Neither do their casts and crews in a lot of cases. As for the Québec films of late? Probably in a subsequent article. Until then, if there exist writers or filmmakers in Montréal who are bi-lingual and would like to review Québec films for Cinema Canada, please let us know. Wouldn't mind reviews of recent films by Jutra, Carle, Lord, Brassard, Brault, Arcand, Perron, Lefebvre as well as those of younger directors. Subtitled prints take so long to be made, that by the time these films get to Toronto, they're ready for the archives.

—George Csaba Koller