

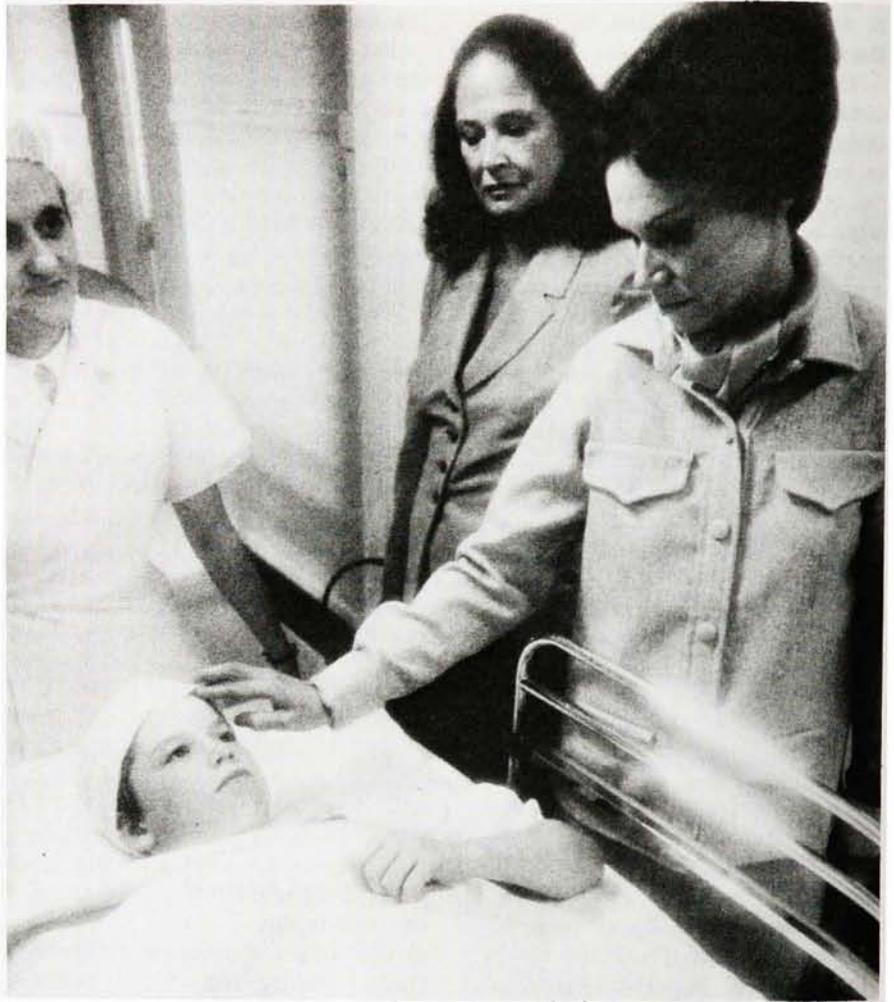
FILM REVIEWS

T.C. McLuhan's THE THIRD WALKER

d: T.C. McLuhan, sc: Robert Thom, ph: Robert Fiore, ed: Ulla Ryghe, sd: Richard Lightstone, sd. ed. Ken Heely-Ray, a.d.: William McCrow, m: Paul Hoffert, l.p.: Colleen Dewhurst, William Shatner, Frank Moore, Monique Mercure, Tony Meyer, David Meyer, Andrée Pelletier, Diana LeBlanc, exec. p: Melvin Simon and Quadrant Films, p: T.C. McLuhan, Brian Winston, p.c. Wychwood Productions (1977), col: 35mm, running time: 93 minutes.

The *Third Walker* may find a few enthusiastic defenders. More likely it will get the bloody bludgeon; savage wit rather than film criticism. The movie is an easy target for all those middlebrow reviewers who have no tolerance for any film outside the mid-ground and who customarily treat the work of Resnais, Pasolini, Warhol (to say nothing of more radical directors) as if it were an illegitimate use of celluloid. In this case the close spiritual relatives of *The Third Walker* are those eccentric Canadian movies — Gordon Shepherd's *Eliza's Horoscope*, Paul Almond's *Journey*, Don Owen's *The Ernie Game*, Joyce Weiland's *The Far Shore*, among others — in which it seems the material is far more meaningful to the director than it is to anyone else.

There are two explanations for this odd form of filmmaking; one prosaic — they are often the handiwork of someone who wrote, produced and directed the whole thing, so that there is little opportunity for internal criticism. By the time the movie is finished, it's way off the deep-end, as subjective as an Elizabeth Smart novel or a Sylvia Plath poem. It takes a monumental obtuseness not to recognize the different latitudes permitted a literary work with its far less-costly economic base, and a supposedly-commercial fea-



Waiting for the operation to establish which of the three boys are the twins...
(Colleen Dewhurst and Monique Mercure)

ture weighing in between \$600,000 and \$1 million, requiring the attention and support of millions of filmgoers to break even. The other (or additional) explanation for our long list of idiosyncratic films is that there is so little sense of artistic community in Canada we don't know what the common language, or the meeting grounds, of our culture should be. In this view, the directors of these films had no inkling that their films would strike many as being unintelligible. They want to establish a distinctive film culture. They want to break with American mass-tastes. But they have great difficulty creating something that is distinctively Canadian and *passionately interesting* to replace the dynamic

mass culture originating in New York and Los Angeles.

By now, after so many Canadian film underdevelopment flops, one would expect any director to realize a few basic rules of the business: (a) the general public doesn't like elliptical, non-linear forms of film story-telling and no such film is ever as popular as those with a straightforward narrative. Moreover, few stories benefit from a fragmented structure. For every *Blow Up*, *If...* or *The Servant* that *can* justify their obliqueness, and which did become major hits, there are dozens of obscurantist muddles — confusing films about nothing vital — that regularly die at the box office and certainly are no model to follow. (b) Any

film that doesn't have much to offer in the way of interesting characters or compelling observations had better lay on the sensationalism (witness Brian de Palma's current success with *The Fury*) so that filmgoers get *something* for their time and money. A common error in Canadian movies is that, not being Bergman, Antonioni or Fellini, our fantasist directors start out aiming at Art and end up looking silly, having given their shallow imaginations free reign to putter about in a cinematic sandbox. Surrealists have to be willing to probe their psyches deeply — boldly and crudely, at the very least, like Alexandro Jodorowsky, or with the consummate skill of Bunuel; otherwise it is a mode of filmmaking best left to the realms of 16mm where high-risk experiments don't lead to financial disaster. With a few exceptions — David Cronenberg, Richard Benner, Murray Markowitz come immediately to mind — the redeeming importance of sensationalism is not much appreciated by Canadian filmmakers.

Maybe, as I have argued elsewhere in "Inner Views", there are too many conservative areas in Canadian society to create and support a *vigorous* film-culture; if true, that leaves us in the paradoxical position of trying to sell naive films to sophisticated markets. Two provinces have recently banned Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby* — you *have* to be a cultural backwater (like Ireland, South Africa, Australia) to support the censorship practices of English-Canada. The question is, if we live in a place that prides itself on its conservative control of passion and imagination, what is there that the outside world should take an interest in? What is there to celebrate? More basically, what is there to sell?

In *The Third Walker* writer-director Teri McLuhan seems only to have considered intermittently that movies are something that have to be marketed. It has a saleable cast — Colleen Dewhurst is especially good, William Shatner and Monique Mercure are fine in smaller roles — but the screenplay never develops the real issues at stake in the story. Mood alone (Cape Breton scenery, Paul Hoffert music) can't sustain the film. Any ideas it has dissipate into whimsy. The story unravels like a knotted ball of yarn but this much is clear:

sometime in the 1950s, twin brothers were born to a Scottish family and were accidentally separated at birth through an error by a maternity-ward nurse. One is sent home to a French-speaking family, the other to his real family along with a "twin" who is not a blood-relation. Monique Mercure portrays the mother of the misplaced twin, Etienne; Colleen Dewhurst, the true mother of the twins, raised his brother, Andrew. The brothers (depicted by real twins, Tony and David Meyer, from the Royal Shakespearean Players in England) are in their early 20s when the film opens, and haven't seen one another for about 15 years. We later learn that Dewhurst became suspicious of a possible error in the hospital when the boys go to school and are frequently mistaken for one another. She undertakes legal action and a court order for all three boys to have skin-graft tests to determine their parentage. The results prove, we are told (the court judgment is rendered by the voice of Marshall McLuhan) that Etienne and Andrew are truly twins while pseudo-brother James (Frank Moore) is of no fixed genetic address. The court further orders that Etienne and James should be swapped but Etienne's mother apparently runs away with him to prevent this from happening. "Apparently," because when the film opens, she lives in the same small community as everyone else, and (there's no explanation why the brothers have never run into one another over the years) and the father of the twins (William Shatner) has no difficulty locating them both, just before he dies. It's at his funeral that the twins meet again, and *The Third Walker* is ready to begin. Phew.

What we have next is a second wave of psychological complications set in the present. Etienne returns to his true mother's household (the twins, in twin beds, have long talks at night. They do a lot of deep staring at one another.) Step-brother James (who looks to be about 30) decides it's time to leave home. Andrew is torn between proceeding with plans to get married or investing all his money in a yacht and "cruising around the world" with his long-lost brother. As his relationship with Etienne deepens, his girl-friend (played by Andrée Pelletier) becomes

jealous, insecure and possessive. He asks her to decide what he should do with his life and gives her all the money he has saved over the years (about \$6,000). He tells her to place all of it on a racetrack bet (Andrew is a jockey) so that he can double it by winning the next race and buy the boat he wants — *if* she thinks that granting him freedom is a wise course. Otherwise she is to keep the money and they'll get married. She keeps the money, he wins the race. Then she realizes he will resent her for the rest of his life. Whereupon parting-brother James, in a gesture of largesse unmatched since the all-for-love sacrifices of Greta Garbo movies, gives her all the money *he* has, so that Andrew will think that she *did* trust him and placed the bet after-all. Then James goes to Andrew and apologizes for having nothing to give him for his wedding, and leaves with stoic heartburn.

If a man had made this movie he would probably be accused of being anti-feminist — at least — if not fur-tively homosexual. None of the female characters are humanly appealing — Dewhurst is ruthless, reducing her husband to alcoholism, and rebuffing the affection of James while pursuing her obsession of getting Etienne; Pelletier portrays a possessive cow to whom "love" means total ownership; Mercure is required to do a shrewish number at the top of her voice. The boys alone are shown to be warm, generous, affectionate — and fascinated by one another.

On the psychological level, the film doesn't wash. On the political-symbolism level, it doesn't make sense (assuming that the French-English division in the movie is supposed to make any comment at all).

Yet, occasionally, more in the resonance of the acting than anything that is said, *The Third Walker* acquires a haunting quality. In the main, however, the film is a wistful mystery about imaginary lives that ultimately has nothing to say. McLuhan is either faking her real concerns, or else, perhaps, she hasn't any.

It's astonishing, given the world we live in currently, that someone could come up with this sheltered-life fantasy.

John Hofsess