

tional, planned activity" clearly delineating humans from the animal world. This view is reiterated so often as to become a kind of anxious emphasis running as subtext. We are told that early hominids must have evolved speech because of the necessities of work, that, "the more they had to organize their activity, the more they had to say," that, "it was in work people learned to think." This insistence on language as work-related, 'rational' and 'planned' becomes the film's way of distinguishing between animal and human - a distinction that seems to carry with it an odd anxiety in the film itself. Much seems to be made of the 'fact' that animal communication arises out of instinct and 'blind drives', while humans are purposeful and rational and speech itself is to be seen as the very sign of this organization and planned rationality. A non-expert, playing devil's advocate, might well ask whether or not pleasure, emotion, love, joy, or play could have had some role in giving rise to the birth of language; but those factors are never addressed as possibilities. To do so might blur the anxious distinction insisted upon between animal and human.

This unconscious subtext explains, in a way, the lengthy sequences devoted to various apes' failure to fully master human speech. Though there is no reason to expect that any one species should be able to communicate in any other species' language, the failure of various apes and chimps to go beyond a certain stage of conceptual communication becomes a subtle way of reassuring humans as to their 'supremacy' in the world. That the 'supremacy' resides in "planned, rational activity" is reiterated throughout the film and even in its closing lines, where we are asked to consider that it was through the development of human language that the species gained, "knowledge, science and human enlightenment," and could "deal with nature and others in a planned and rational way".

Thus mirroring the rationalism of the dominant society, with all its anxious fears about the animal nature of humans, the film nevertheless cannot help but reveal an unusual split within its own workings. If there is any energy in the film at all, it is within the sequences which reconstruct life in Africa, "40 or 50 thousand years ago". Actors in full hominid makeup reenact certain dimensions of tribal life, but particularly aspects such as hunting, tool-making, food-gathering - the very purposeful activities which the film has been so in-

sistent upon as demarcating human from animal. Such reenactments noticeably exclude any sense of ritual, magic, song, pageantry, mime, dance, or spiritual expression that were such a central feature of early tribal life. Rather, the reconstructions suggest that early humans were as proper and subdued, polite and purposeful as Canadians in the twentieth century. Even so, that the film's only glimmer of energy resides in such scenes suggests that, like our larger society itself, the filmmakers are drawn to a reconnection with the 'primitive', a reunification of the rational and animal sides of our nature. This desire, however, must be masked by the high purpose and 'academic' tone of the film, and especially by the voice-over narration continually insisting on the planned, rational dimension of human beings.

Such a reading of the unconscious subtext of *The Birth of Language* seems necessary to not only partially reveal a specific ideology running through it, but also to at least partially account for the differences between it and the earlier documentary by the same filmmaker. It is as though the desire for international success has undermined the very qualities that made *Here's to the Cowboy* such a fine work. The very energy that imbued the earlier film and raised it beyond the ordinary has been squelched, tamed, and harnessed to efficient production. Like the factory scenes which end the film and are (strangely) offered as some kind of sign of great human achievement, *The Birth of Language* seems an unfortunate concession to the bland internationalism that the screen industry upholds.

Joyce Nelson •

**THE BIRTH OF LANGUAGE** d./sc. Paul Jay d.o.p. Joan Hutton art d. Gillian Stokvis music Russell Walker ed. Paul Jay add. ed. Chris Pinder assist. ed. Celeste Natale narr. Richard Monette III. Gillian Stokvis Dr. Laitman's III. Hugh Thomas sd. rec. Ingrid Cusiel, Marc Chiasson, Bruce Carwardine, Dianne Carriere, Anna George special make-up Maureen Sweeny make-up tech. Rose-Marie Czeszchowski, Judy Murdock, Delores Bruce, Margaret Cichara-Osmond, Sandra Etherington, Cvitka Marun cam. assist. Gillian Stokvis, Lem Ristsod, Celeste Natale sd. post-prod Glen Gauthier, Marc Chiasson, Celeste Natale re-rec. Film House, Tonly Van Den Akker timing Film House, Robert Borics horse trainers Rick Parker, Sue Perreault-Parker prod. assist. Lisa Hillman, Amy Bodman, Leonard Farlinger, Derek Rogers, Nina Sparks, Jessica Allan I.p. Carlton Watson, Laura Pudwell, Debra Chase, Jack Evans, Sally Ford, Diane Hawkins, Robert O'Connor, Patrick Jones, Margaret Ofori, Wendy Walker, Kamal McLaughlin, Jamal Mayers, Renee O'Connor color 16mm and all video formats running time 1 hour

Doug Harris' **Remembering Mel**

**R**emembering Mel is far from memorable. This first feature from Montrealer Doug Harris is like a Saturday Night Live skit that starts with a good idea but drags on way too long. The first 40 minutes are often funny but the comedy grows stale as the same jokes get repeated over and over again. Nevertheless, it is energetic and original enough to be a promising first film. It may not be a really good film but then again neither was Jim Jarmusch's first feature. Which is not to say that the next Doug Harris film is going to be a *Stranger than Paradise* but rather that just-out-of-university usually translates into less-than-fully-developed-filmmaker.

*Remembering Mel* uses two well-worn cinematic clichés: the film within a film and the mock documentary that sends itself up. The documentary is being made by a group of ex-film students dying to break into the movie business. They pick Mel as their subject because he's such a loser and the point of their documentary is to exploit his pathetic character for the sake of making a movie that will get noticed.

The opening sequences echo Woody Allen's seminal mock documentary, *Take the Money and Run*: talking heads from Mel's past life reminisce about what a loser Mel was. These interviews are funny because they're unexpected; we're so used to the TV documentary which typically begins with the fond memories of an old school-teacher rambling on about the subject's childhood. But once we're bludgeoned over the head with the idea that Mel's a loser, it gets boring watching him knock things over or get beat up by kids on the street.

Like several of Montreal's recent Anglo film and communications grads, Harris' style occasionally evokes the low-budget, underground aesthetic (à la John Waters). So there are the bizarre characters - Mel's grotesque aunt who does a ludicrous song and dance routine - and the compulsory grossness - Mel stuffing a huge smoked meat sandwich into his mouth and letting it dribble down his chin in close-up.

This indebtedness to American cinematic satire is counterbalanced by *Remembering Mel's* slickness. The production values are high enough that this film wouldn't look out of place on commercial television - which is more than can be said for many indie Montreal features. *Remembering Mel* straddles the fence between the commercial young Anglo Montreal cinema - the films of writer-producer Tom Berry (*Crazy Moon*), for example - and the more interesting underground style of young filmmakers like Demetrei Estdelacropolis, Bachar Chbib, and many of the directors associated with Main Film. *Remembering Mel's* position - squarely on the fence - evident? underlined? is crystallized in the contrast between the plot's sometimes twisted

satirical bent and the choice of music. The bands on the soundtrack are a who's who of dull top-40 Canadian rock: the Box, Images in Vogue, the Arrows, and Walter Rossi. This music is a poignant argument against Canadian nationalism in the music industry.

Still, *Remembering Mel* is a decent first feature. There are some genuinely funny moments, especially when Mel decides he's a serious actor who will not be pushed around by these filmmakers. The film also accurately conveys the desperation of ex-film students trying to make the leap from school to the "real" world of the movie business.

And that, in the end, is what *Remembering Mel* is all about. The director and writer, Doug Harris, and his co-writer, Larry Raskin are recent graduates of Concordia's Communications Program and they readily admit that their first stab at feature filmmaking was a learning experience as much as anything else. It was a learning experience of the vagaries of the Canadian film business and of how to make a movie *real* quick. Harris was working at Taurus 7 in December, 1984. According to him, the company discovered it had some investment money lying around which had to be spent by the end of the calendar year but it didn't have a film. Harris and Raskin wrote the script in three days and principal photography was completed between December 20 and the new year. They then slaved over an editing machine in Harris' basement for most of the next year.

The far from normal way in which *Remembering Mel* was made should not be used as an excuse for the film's faults. But the story behind the making of the film does underline *Remembering Mel's* implicit theme: it ain't easy being a young filmmaker in Montreal in 1986.

Brendan Kelly •

**REMEMBERING MEL** p.c. Taurus 7 Film Corporation Production p. Claude Castravelli, Peter Serapillia assoc. p. Doug Harris, Larry Raskin sc. Doug Harris, Larry Raskin d. Doug Harris d.o.p. Steve Campanelli, Nicolas Marion, David Franco ed. Doug Harris, Larry Raskin, Don Rennie assist. d. Frank Ross, John Fretz, Tom Groszman, Kim Berlin prod. man. Peter Serapillia, Sean Dwyer orig. mus. Les Leroux loc. sd. David Bannon, Steve Woloshen cont. Cynthia Harris unit. man. Dan Prevost post. prod. co-ord. Andrew Levine casting Larry Raskin, Cynthia Harris assist. cam. J. F. Bourassa, Robert Stecko, Esther Valiquette lighting crew Alain Massé, Christian Racine, Maité Sarthou, Raymond St. Jean, Marc Henault art dept. Dan McManus, David Blanchard, Lorrie Barth, Sheila McManus, Glen Scott Make-up/hair Wendy Boode, Simona Thurnheer ward. Cynthia Patton prod. assists. René Carré Jr., Donato Totaro, Robert Moisseau, Robert Rosman, Bill Conabree, Marc Degagné, Ron Mendelman sd. ed. Jacques Leroux creative consult. Simona Thurnheer I.p. Robert Kolomeir, Arthur Holden, Jim Connolly, Guy Laprade, Natalie Timoschuk, Allan Lallouz, Steven Light, Ariel Grumberg, Isadore Lapin, Estelle Cooney, Bob Brenhouse, Anna Harris, Roger Racine, Evelyn Kussner, Zander Ary, Stuart Simmonds, Tom Gormley, Julie Allen, Essar Raskin, Sharon Woloshen, Dan Prevost, Jacob Greenbaum, Chris Thurnheer, Roland Silva, Bill Conabree, Neil Asbil, Sailor White, Simona Thurnheer, Leslie Tochinsky, Keith Brown songs "The Camera Never Lies" - T.No, "Holiday" and "King's Service" - Images in Vogue, "Promised Land" - Tchukon, "Sexual Outlaw" - Carole Pope and Rough Trade, "Soldiers in the Night" - Walter Rossi, "Must I Always Remember" and "With all this Cash" - The Box, "Dancing with a Mystery" and "I'd Rather Be Dancing" - Foreign Affairs, "Talk Talk" - The Arrows. color 35mm running time, 78 min.

• Learning to talk in *The Birth of Language*

