

Cathy Ord's
Dear John

You have seen this film before – almost. A young, strawberryblonde female in leather jacket and high heels trots anxiously along a maze of industrial back alleys, obviously searching for somewhere to hide. She is being stalked by a silent, rodent-like man dressed as a soldier. Tension mounts. Then, defeated by her pumps and a high brick wall, the woman is trapped by the fatigued figure. He savours the fear on his victim's attractive face before raising a sub-machine-gun in aim. But the weapon is plastic, and the fired shots are only vocal imitations. The homicidal maniac laughs in childish delight. The victim gives him a look of utter disgust and walks away. Roll credits.

These are the opening moments of *Dear John*, a first feature written and directed by Cathy Ord. From this disorienting beginning, the film's viewers are implicated and drawn into its constantly shifting levels of fiction. In exploring ideas of personal, social, (and filmic) truth, the filmmaker plays the conventionally "realistic" visual style of *Dear John* against a narrative preoccupation with appearance and identity.

This is certainly well ski-doo'd snow in the area of Canadian cinema. English-language features in this country – from *Goin' Down the Road to I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* – have displayed an obvious predilection for tales of the nonconformist struggling to find a place within the false values and alienating structures of modern society. The less successful of such works usually comes to occupy artistic and intellectual space found somewhere between a particularly ambitious *Afterschool Special* and an especially sanctimonious issue of *Plain Truth*.

Mercifully, *Dear John* spares audiences this brand of cheesy pathos and simplistic morality. Ord's film seems so committed to examining problematic characters and situations without elaboration that it sometimes allows itself to become unlikeable. This is remarkable in an early commercial effort, and *Dear John* for all its flaws and inconsistencies – is to be congratulated for its reluctance to pander, and to simplify complex issues.

Dear John follows a motley ensemble of characters through a short, miserable period of their common lives, and only begins to resemble a conventional plot headed for narrative closure some thirty minutes before ending; needless to say, some may find it difficult. The film holds the more valiant viewer by exciting curiosity. *Dear John* is the story of individuals who have jettisoned their pasts and assumed the most convenient identities that the cold city has to offer, always at the expense of the emotional self. Janet (Valerie Buhagiar) exists on a hamsterwheel of discount blow-jobs, kleptomania, junk food, and roachy rooms until



Valerie Buhagiar and Stan Lake with all eyes on the mirror in *Dear John*

encountering a feisty transvestite hooker known as Rocket (Stan Lake). Suited up for life battle in a platinum fall and Le Chateau's entire winter collection – worn all at once – Rocket gives the surly newcomer a lecture on cramping her working style: "I'm runnin' a business, not a hobby... I can't run home to Mummy when things get bad."

Of course, this is wretched dialogue, made all the more unconvincing when delivered by a hammy actor in his most overdone *Ida-Lupino-goes-to-hell* tones. Likewise, Janet's relentless tough chick attitude tends to grate. But in the context of the work as a whole, these layers of fiction begin to form a recognizable geography – the formations of social behaviour in the paralytic self-consciousness of our times. In this manner, *Dear John* comes to engage in an indirect reflexivity, acknowledging the impact of consumer culture and media images on our sense of being in the 1980s. Janet and Rocket have displaced memory with incomplete personas, constructed with the Darwinian logic demanded by their environment. Intentionally or not, the failure of these social scripts and roles creates the impression that Ord's characters exist in the purgatory that is modernity's "B-movie."

Lest such a reading of *Dear John* be construed as an apology for the work's inadequacies, there is certainly ample evidence for this narrative strategy. Images of masked and altered identity permeate the film, especially in its treatment of sexuality. Janet is initially disturbed by the androgyny of Rocket and his companion in ladies' wear, Sid. Their carefree appropriation of "sleazy babe" apparel and cosmetics obviously seems unnatural to her hypocritical ideas of gender propriety. Taken to a gay bar, she is equally repelled by Jane, the cross-dressed lesbian who exhibits "quite a bit of Tarzan, as well." Even as Janet begins to detect the cracks of humanity beneath the pancake foundation of her friends, her bourgeois sensibilities want to recover Rocket for conventional, G. Q. concepts of masculinity. Upon refusing her birthday gift of a stylish suit, Rocket tells Janet that she disappoints him. "Couldn't we pretend something else, just for tonight?" Janet begs. The scene closes on their slow, bittersweet dance – she in a virginal strapless, he without makeup – together in yet another form of disguise.

Dear John's pessimistic moments are made palatable by the script's subversive humour. Ord clearly takes pleasure in crossing the thin line between stock characterization and outright

parody. Near the start of the film, for example, Connie – The Loquacious Diner Waitress With A Heart Of Gold – is introduced. Lending cardigans and dispensing perky advice *ad nauseam*, Connie threatens to induce diabetic coma. In a much later scene, however, Janet comes upon Connie playing cards with two trucker women – "Oh yes," confides the waitress, "those two have been trying to pick me up for years." Connie becomes an integral part of the film's resolution.

Likewise, absurdity is used to disrupt complacent viewing of *Dear John*. When an especially tragic character meets his end, the funeral is attended by his male hooker friends in full mourning drag. The deceased's elderly father kisses a sobbing Rocket, clearly under the impression that his late son's girlfriend is beneath the black lace veil.

All this knowing irony and cool distance would rapidly become tiresome if it were not balanced by *Dear John's* acceptance of its character's contradictions. The most surprising, radical element within the work is the relationship that develops between its most diverse inhabitants. Janet and Rocket do not complete their journey of self-knowledge in the space of the film, never quite locating a sense of true identity. Their common question becomes how to be oneself when one has little idea of who one is? Janet longs for the security of suburbia and its plastic slip-covered domesticity. Rocket fantasizes an endlessly glamorous tango along the Seine in the arms of "monsieur droit." The sudden transformation of those desires comes unexpectedly, in a tentative and imperfect moment in which their shared game of emotional hide-and-seek takes both to the same place, as equals. If the film contains a single unique and perversely convincing moment, it is found here.

Dear John's finale makes explicit its socio-political concerns. Allegorically-speaking, we witness the implosion of patriarchy and the emergence of a whole new kind of Adam and Eve – whoopee! Narratively satisfying, this ending seems a little forced and out of proportion after the peculiar delicacy of *Dear John's* finest observations. Nonetheless, if Cathy Ord is able to maintain her uncompromising spirit and refine her vision, she will certainly be a Canadian filmmaker to watch. And auteurs don't even have to worry about the formation of identity – someone else does it for them.

Lisa Godfrey •

DEAR JOHN p./d./sc./ed. Cathy Ord d.o.p. Doug Koch art dir. Allan Fellows makeup Lynn Matthews wardrobe Melinda Foresters sd. ed. Robert Vollum mus. Gary Martin 1st a. d. Camelia Frieberg 2nd a. d. Robert Simpson stills Joanne Hovey craft services Avant Gout grip Jake Fry gaffer David Owen prod. asst. Malcolm Tweety l.p. Valerie Buhagiar, Stan Lake, Thomas Rickert, Daniel Macivor, David Macdea, Evelyn Kaye, William Beddo. Funding Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, OFDC, Telefilm. Colour, 35mm, 120 min. dist. Norstar