

the monkeys of morley markson

The box office gross is not the only measure of a film's worth. Below, Maurice Yacowar takes a penetrating look at the films of Morley Markson, and tells us why he considers Markson one of the best filmmakers in Canada.

by Dr. Maurice Yacowar



Victor Garber clowning in *Monkeys*



Morley Markson on the set

The Tragic Diary of Zero, the Fool:

Penelope, her lover and her fool are actors in a movie, manipulated by their director (Markson), yet at times prompted to assert their own identities. At first they play roles based on the characters of the Tarot, but their selves take more and more command over their roles.

Breathing Together:

A variety of media heroes, artists, visionaries and revolutionaries are paraded in this cross-sectional view of the emerging counter-culture of the early '70s. Again the film deals with the dramatic interweaving of media and realities. Based on the Chicago Conspiracy Trial, the film presents Allen Ginsberg, Buckminster Fuller, Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Fred Hampton, John Sinclair, William Kunstler, Don Cox, Claes Oldenberg, John Lennon, Timothy Leary.

Monkeys in the Attic:

Four characters live in a splendid kinky Toronto house. Wanda and Eric are a clowning, crazy couple, wild in fantasy and in sexuality. Elaine and Frederick are on the point of breaking up, it appears, as Frederick bullies Elaine and Elaine retreats into absence, fantasies, Courvoisier and pills. She recoils from Frederick's dominance and from the other couple's freakiness.

At the height of the madness a messenger arrives from the outside world, pizza delivery boy Gus (whose shirt bears the name of his colleague, Frank). Gus is lured into Elaine's bathtub, then dumped into the backyard pool with his pizzas. His boss, Luigi, phones at the end to reassert the claims of the outside world upon the fanciful foursome.

The three feature films of Morley Markson seem radically different types of film, yet each has its own power. Together they form an impressive canon. **The Tragic Diary of Zero the Fool** (1970) has the liveliness and the limitations of a work that chooses to stand as process rather than as product of artistic creation. **Breathing Together: Revolution of the Electric Family** (1971) has the fertility of collage – a panoply of bright celebrities articulating the spirit of the Brave New '70s.

Both features were kinds of documentary. They were the films of an artist who did not want to tell a story. So **Breathing** fashioned an impression of a period, sometimes contradictory, always fresh. **Zero** thrived in that no-man's-land that conventionally separates the teller from the tale. It was a diary, not a story. It did not tell of its three characters but rather recorded the filmmaker's compelling of his actors to perform the story of their three characters. Markson's fascination was with the connections between the actor and the character, the person and his image, the self and the projection, a motif he picked up again in **Breathing** with the interplay between Jerry Rubin in the flesh and Jerry Rubin telecast. In both films Markson did not seem interested in story – neither in event nor in character – so much as in the techniques of connecting character and actor, self and image. For all his dedication of **Zero** to Beckett, it was the technician, the prober, the inventor, the designer, in Markson that dominated these first two features.

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With **Monkeys in the Attic** Markson becomes undeniably the artist and story-teller. As it happens, the film is also his most accomplished technically. It has a finely modulated and inventive soundtrack and settings, delicate camera movement, subtle editing, and is splendidly conceived and realized. But as well as sensually, the film is his most rewarding emotionally and intellectually.

Monkeys deals with two couples, weird and lively, who live in a sumptuous house. Within the hermetic character of this household, one couple can be defined as free and artistic: Eric (Victor Garber) and Wanda (Jackie Burroughs). The other couple are (though only relatively) "straights." Frederick (Louis del Grande) and Elaine (Jess Walton) lack the first couple's ability to body forth their tensions and desires in mime, mimic, masking, or simple playfulness. As a result Elaine drifts towards suicide and Frederick expresses his frustrations in violence. The really straight world is represented by Gus (shirt-named Frank, played by Jim Henshaw), the pizza delivery boy who is stripped by Elaine, seduced by Wanda, and assaulted and drenched by Frederick. Within the household, however, the stolidity of Frederick and Elaine is defined by their tenseness, their frustration, their rigidity and brittleness, their more formal (and more concealing) dress, and the fact that until the very end they are the only two characters we see outside the house, i.e. relating to the outside world, however alienated they may be.

Markson resumed in **Monkeys** his exploration of the uses and the spirit of art. In **Zero** he examined the ways in which actor projects self into fiction. The structure of **Breathing Together** gave poet-philosopher Allen Ginsberg the framing function of spiritual source of the film and all its dignified "crazies"; Ginsberg the Poet and Community Pulse. In **Monkeys** Markson's artist figures are the two characters constantly at play. The battle between "a dead culture and a live culture" depicted in **Breathing** is replayed here, but as a comparison more than as a battle.

Wanda has imagination and character. But she lacks the sobriety and balance that makes Eric the film's ideal. Wanda's art sometimes goes out of control, as when she tries but fails to console Elaine. Eric controls his art, as is evidenced in the severe shifts of tone in his games with Wanda. Eric uniquely responds to Elaine's needs, senses her dangerous mood, and turns on his art of clowning (Substance the Fool) to help her back to her senses. Eric remains the cool center when the other three are variously disturbed by Gus (Frederick), excited by Gus (Elaine) or both (Wanda). Eric turns on his art (mimicry) to keep the dangerous outside world (Luigi) at bay. His control may be unsettling to Wanda, who finds Frederick "a little tight-ass" for Elaine. Eric will quote (and actually perform) a speech from *Lear*, where Frederick can only bluster and Gus can only fall back on inanity ("Ma'am, I think you lost your bathing suit.")

Eric's art is capable of both private expression (his piano playing) and public address and involvement (playing monkeys with Wanda, clown with Elaine, and comic and film stereotypes with everyone). Unlike Wanda, Eric can turn his art off and relate simply humanly, as he does to warn Frederick and to soothe Elaine.

Wanda's art is rooted in her personal tension so she cannot control it. She needs her acts, in a way Eric does not. So Wanda dissolves when her sensual games

are deflated by the pragmatic Gus ("I just want to get laid. That's all. I just want to get laid."). After that scene she does not regain her former aplomb until the closing shot on the U. of T. campus.

The closed fantasy world of Wanda is not eternally secure. It can be shivered from without (the naivety of Gus) and from within (Elaine's tensions, Eric's fluctuations). The film is subtitled **A Film of Exploding Dreams** partly because it is continually bursting out in unpredictable fantasies, but also because the dreams don't last. They grow and explode. They pop like the bubbles in Elaine's bath, from which her white telephone rises solid, substantial and secure, as a reminder of the reality to which the fantastic must remain connected. The excoriating dark night of the fantasy gives way to the inevitable dawn. As the four-some follow Gus out to the street they return to normalcy, exposed as themselves in the new light, after the manner of those other overnight forays, **La Notte** and **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?** Frederick simmers down, Eric shucks his clown face and Elaine recomposes herself.

Gus drives off with the two artists in his truck. Perhaps he is carrying off a touch of madness of his own now, a glimpse into the life the human mind can feed. Or perhaps Elaine has banished the tempestuous image of the artist from her fancy. In either case, the film closes with the artists enjoying their first calm in the film. The simpleton has taken them away from their house of rich art and spirit. They have settled beyond the intensity and urgencies of art.

Frederick and Elaine (and, needless to say, Gus) are beneath art, false artists. Frederick is a frustrated noveliest, blocked, furious. Driven to fashion art from the intimate facts of his life, he tapes their first lovemaking. But the material confounds him: the girl drifts away; the machine jams. Markson cuts from Frederick throwing away the babbling recorder to Eric stripping, wearing a loudspeaker horn as a huge phallus. The potency as man and as artist lies with Eric; Frederick only pretends. Rape is a threat, uttered by Frederick, but a promise when spoken by Eric.

Frederick is the shallowest of the four artists (Gus being a non-artist, just a delivery boy, a medium). Eric is the truest, with inspiration and with control and humanity. Wanda's art and Elaine's art are out of their control, the result of their emotional fragility. Elaine is the victim of her fantasies, but Wanda (as her name implies, with the potency of the rod) is the creator of hers. Wanda's atavism recalls the magic of Zero and his Tarot players. Eric and Wanda can dramatize and express their tensions. Lacking these creative powers, Fred is frustrated and furious and Elaine drifts towards suicide.

The settings express the lush sensibilities of the characters. The flat is all white (Elaine's dream color) except where it explodes into the opulent pictures and hangings of the true artist's quarters. Life peeks through the artifice. Eric plays piano to a goldfish. When Elaine hits the pills a single rose stoops in the background; at the end, though, Elaine stands firm and resolved behind a solid oak tree.

There are enough mirrors in this film to give Joseph Losey pause for reflection. Wanda rarely appears without her mirror image and frequently enters playing with or against her mirror reflection. It is as if she were incomplete without her images, as if she depended upon the bodying of her fantasies. Wanda's reflections are as firm and clear as herself, and off glass of her own arrangement. In contrast,

Elaine's first reflections are weak, shimmering in water, over which she has no control. Frederick at the bar and Elaine at her dressing table have mirror images to amplify their sense of loneliness and isolation. These shots are contrasted with those of the artists. While Frederick and Elaine are in their separate solitudes Wanda and Eric act out a monkey love scene, dress in twin clown suits, and then perform the theatre mirror routine, where they move together facing each other as if one body with its reflection. Their mirror-mime reveals their kinetic understanding. The artists are also the liveliest lovers.

As an exploration of art, the center of the film is Eric. As a more general parable of life, the center can be taken as Elaine, the neutral character for whom the others' lives are possible courses of commitment. Elaine is our first human contact in the film, after the credit shots of shimmering water and the Toronto skyline. Most of the action we see is from her perspective. The soundtrack is often subjective too, as the overwhelming drip of the tub taps, for instance. Where we watch Eric and Wanda acting out their games, Elaine's fantasies we see directly, as if they were happening to our mind. We have Elaine's vision of an austere, pure lady in a long (and high-necked) white Victorian gown, beset by the loonies. So the artists' departure at the end can be taken as her banishment of them, or their discreet withdrawal from her imbalance.

In either reading the center of the film is Eric's brilliant soliloquy on the numerous ways man conspires to bridle and to break the force of his imagination. Eric speaks Markson's credo here, a sweeping dismissal of philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, theology, and any other modish attitudinizing, in favor of the liberty of the fancy, however mad. It is significant that the speech happens in Elaine's fantasy, not in the real exchanges between the characters. For the speech thus tells us what Elaine likes in Eric, rather than what he claims to be. It expresses his appeal, rather than any platform or confessional. So it saves Eric from any pretensions and self-justification. Eric stands in modest contrast to the pretentiousness of Elaine and the brute callousness of Frederick here:

Elaine: You're a good man, Frederick, but I need two souls.

Fred: Fuck your soul.

Eric wears his role and power lightly. His own dream finds him sitting atop a dark and quiet mountain, awakening to find his whole body covered in banana peels. The artist has nourished the crazies.

Lexically, thence metaphorically, "Eric" is embedded in "Frederick." The practical, sober Frederick is an encrusted Eric; the artist and lover Eric is an essence buried in even Frederick, crying to get out.

Morley Markson's monkeys are not bats in the belfry. They are the powers of sense and sensibility. They are the spirit that Markson exercised in **Zero** and found again in the Yippies of **Breathing** (and in those released Fredericks and educated Guses: Buckminster Fuller, Fred Hampton, William Kunstler, Claes Oldenburg, John Sinclair, Don Cox). Markson celebrates - in the fool, the crazies, the monkeys - the dignity of the human spirit at its most lunatic and free and irresponsible. Quite apart from the technical skill in his craftsmanship, Morley Markson is clearly one of Canada's major filmmakers, capable of remarkable diversity in style but with a measured and consistent world vision. □