

Larry Kent

Lost

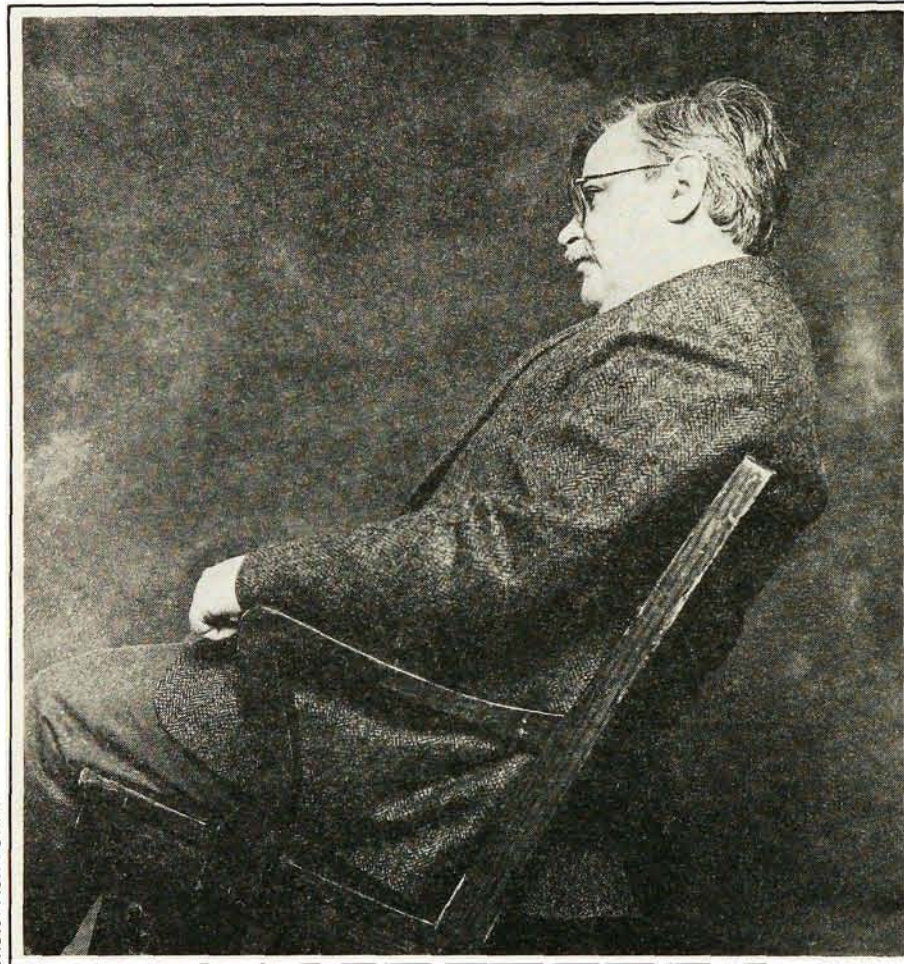


photo: Ron Levine

and
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A critical rehabilitation

by Piers Handling

I would like to express my thanks to the National Film, Television and Sound Archives for arranging screenings of Kent's films, in particular D. John Turner for all his kind help; and to Pat Mycyk of Telefilm Canada. This article is for Marie-Claude.

Piers Handling is a freelance broadcaster, film programmer with Toronto's Festival of Festivals, and editor and the author of numerous monographs and studies on Canadian cinema.

Larry Kent has virtually disappeared from the cinematic landscape of this country. His films are not shown, critically he has been ignored, his work is not even taught in film-studies courses. Distribution rights have lapsed, the films are unavailable (fortunately preserved by the diligent efforts of the National Film, Television and Sound Archives), and so they get no public screenings, even at cinémathèques or film institutes. His early films have not been seen in almost two decades (apart from a single screening of *The Bitter Ash*, *Sweet Substitute*, *When Tomorrow Dies* and *High* at the Toronto Festival of Festivals in 1984, and a further screening of *The Bitter Ash* at the Funnel in March, 1985). Larry Kent has faded from our cinematic album, little more than a dimly remembered name.

Perhaps Kent is unworthy of an

auteur study. His career has been uneven and recently he has taken on projects not entirely to his liking, relinquishing a control over his material that he had exercised completely (as director, writer and producer) on his first five films. But, upon closer examination, it is possible to uncover common themes and a progressing vision, even if the recent work holds less interest than the early films of the '60s. And perhaps it is too easily forgotten that during that decade, only Jean Pierre Lefebvre made more films in this country than Kent, that Kent made his first feature, alone, on the West coast, a year before Owen and Groulx produced *Nobody Waved Good-bye* and *Le chat dans le sac*, the two films that announce the beginnings of modern Canadian cinema. Kent is a key figure in the Canadian cinema of the '60s, displaying a talent that like Owen's would go sadly unrewarded.

To a very great extent the parabola of Kent's career is remarkably similar to a number of our best directors: people who started out by establishing their reputations with promising low-budget independent features before adapting their style in an attempt to fit into the supposedly more commercial, conventional framework of the "mainstream" industry. In varying degrees this has happened to directors as unique and individual as Don Shebib, Don Owen, Paul Almond, Gilles Carle, Denys Arcand, Claude Jutra, Jean-Claude Lord and Bill Fruet. Somehow, their inventiveness, formal questionings and eschewal of traditional narrative have fallen on barren ground, and after a commercial flop or two, they have adapted and compromised, rather than impose their vision like Jean-Pierre Lefebvre. But he is the exception, and perhaps not surprisingly is viewed as

our most prestigious filmmaker in international circles. The only filmmaker who has made the step from the personal to the commercial with any degree of real success is David Cronenberg, although it appears that Phil Borsoos might be the second. So Kent is not an exception in our tradition.

Those people who have seen any of Kent's work are introduced to it through the two recent "commercial" films — *Keep It in the Family* and *Yesterday*— because they have been shown on network and pay-television. But these are his least interesting films and are only worthy of attention in the context of his previous work. They also totally misrepresent the earlier films, their contrivance and conventionality leaving one totally unprepared for the audacity, incisiveness and vigor of the rest of his work.

NO PLACE TO GO

(*The Bitter Ash*, 1963; *Sweet Substitute*, 1964; *When Tomorrow Dies*, 1965)

Kent's first three films set the stage for the rest of his work. They centre around loveless marriages and trapped couples, living in a very specific social and economic milieu. Many of the characters are frustrated by the lives they are living, yet they find it impossible to effect any change. The three films all posit definite choices in their discourses, choices that disrupt and trouble tradition, security and societal expectations, but these transgressions are ultimately "safely" resolved, albeit with a strong sense of irony. If marriage, as a social institution and a state of mind, is foregrounded in these films, it is often related to questions of sexuality and the expression or repression of desire.

The first three films all employ very similar visual and musical strategies. They are restless films, mirroring the psychological agitation of his characters, shot and edited with an apparent randomness and energy that is reminiscent of *A bout de souffle* or *Jules et Jim*. There is little attempt to disguise the camera's eye or turn it into a neutral, documentary observer in the manner of Owen in *Nobody Waved Good-bye*. Kent's camera is at times unobtrusive and static, a dispassionate recorder of events and conversations, but it also often roams like a disembodied eye, pulling a face into extreme close-up or skimming boldly across surfaces. This nervous edge is further underlined by the almost continuous use of jazz on the soundtrack, raucously vibrant or gently reflective, depending on the mood and tone of the scene it scores. Furthermore, Kent's editing decisions often reinforce this overwhelming sense of instability, giving an arbitrary feeling to certain scenes that is directly tied to Kent's view of the lives his characters are living.

The Bitter Ash and *Sweet Substitute* depict young men trying to navigate the intricate complexities of emotional commitment prior to making a decision to marry, while *When Tomorrow Dies* transfers many of the same questions onto a middle-aged married woman facing a "mid-life" crisis. All the films employ a simple triangular structure: the central character confronted by two

people who represent different potentialities. This triangular structure is common to virtually all of Kent's work (the two exceptions being *High* and *Yesterday*) and is the first clue to his thematic concerns, indicating the importance of choice and its attendant implications. But while there may be choice, his characters invariably make the "wrong" decision within the dialectic that the films establish, choosing the line of least resistance, often returning to where they started.

The opening moments of Kent's first film, *The Bitter Ash*, contains a number of ideas that are explored in most of the subsequent work. The credits are placed next to stark, uncompromising "wash" drawings of a man and a woman. The figures are nude, almost featureless. The two figures are never shown together in the same image. Separate, there is a tortured, discordant feel to these sketches, suggestive of a primal struggle between the sexes that will never be resolved. Then we cut to the first scene of the film which contextualizes these drawings for us. A couple is in bed; she doesn't feel like going to work and grumbles about the other women in her office. Throughout their conversation, warmth, love and even kindness is absent. She complains that he never listens to her and only wants her for sex. He is cynical and ill-tempered, and remarks that all a woman has to do is get married and "some poor slob works his guts out for you for the rest of your life." As if to underline the exchange-value of this conception of marriage, Kent cuts to a cheque lying on a table, which also carries overtones of prostitution, of marriage as an economic arrangement where sex is exchanged for security. This loveless couple, Des and Julie, aren't married but Julie has just missed her period and warns Des that they had better do something about it. As she says this to him, she is dressed in black, fully made-up, foregrounded in the image, and the camera looks down on her as she stands looking down on Des lying in bed. This tough, acrimonious exchange, laden with threats, with its suggestion of the woman as predator, the man as victim, seeing himself as trapped for the rest of his life, establishes the emotional parameters of Kent's films.

Marriage is viewed as a prison in all these three films. Des feels that he is being manoeuvred into a marriage he doesn't want and so he simply avoids Julie; she is absent as a presence until the final shot of the film, underscoring his attempt to escape emotional commitment. But the people that Des meets are all involved in destructive relationships of one sort or another. Colin and Laurie, he an aspiring playwright determined to write the great play while she supports his fantasies through a variety of demeaning jobs, live a relationship of acrimony and mutual recrimination. He feels he is being sucked dry by his marriage while Laurie has attempted suicide to try and regain her husband's attention. Death lingers around the marital union of another couple in the film; he suffering from an incurable disease; their house bare and empty, gutted of feeling. Laurie's parents live out a mockery of a marriage. She has turned to drink, openly lusts after younger men and despises her husband whom she accuses of spending time with "sluts."



• Yesterday

photo: Cinémathèque Québécoise



• Kent directing *High* (1967)

photo: Cinémathèque Québécoise



• The young Carole Laure and Steve Firtz in *The Apprentice* (1971)

Their encounters are harsh and ugly, by turns cynical and embittered, undercut with latent violence.

Sweet Substitute and *When Tomorrow Dies* escape the fatigued despair of Kent's first film, but both of them revolve around marriage. In the former, a bright and intelligent young man, whose libido turns incessantly towards sex, finds himself falling into the arms of a provocative girl who successfully manipulates him. Elaine is a schemer, a predator like Julie, and Tom becomes her unwary victim. Here the notion of exchange, alluded to in *The Bitter Ash* has become more explicit, and indeed Elaine gives it a verbal authority when she explains her attitude towards relationships: "If sex is all a guy wants from a girl, make a deal. Marriage first, then bed." In *When Tomorrow Dies* the metaphor of marriage as a prison is visually pronounced in a number of carefully selected images. Shopping carts and dish washing racks are framed in such a way that Wynn is placed behind what appears to be prison bars. Her morning, a suggestion of her daily routine—breakfast, the dishes, vacuuming—is shot in a series of discreet close-ups, suggesting the hermetic and fragmented nature of her life. The domestic objects that surround her even manage to distort her image, and this is poignantly underlined when we see her face reflected in a shiny toaster. Even the architecture of her house, with its looming arches and outdoor pools, reinforces this sense of restriction, and when she does have an affair, the environment in which it is placed—the open sea and empty beaches—suggests the space and freedom that she is trying to attain.

If marriage is seen as a trap, so too is life in its broader terms. In *The Bitter Ash*, work is referred to as "a coffin," and as a place where unknown people try and turn you into a number for the rest of your life. Talk of the new technology putting 60% of the work-force out of a job reinforces the sense of a hopeless future. Des brutally summarizes a sick friend's life in two sentences: "You work in a boring place... a number... can be replaced just like that. Then you get married, become an automat." In *Sweet Substitute*, Elaine works as a secretary in an office supervised by a strict manager. It is seen as a place of no future that she tries to escape by marrying someone who will earn enough money to support her. *When Tomorrow Dies* is no different. Doug's work interferes with Wynn's desire for affection; when she wants to make love he has to work late on a report. Even Trevelyan, the English professor with whom Wynn has a brief affair, calls academic life "a rat-race." Wynn refers to her life as a living death where she has to be dead to be happy with her husband.

Happiness is more often than not an illusion and love an impossibility. In *The Bitter Ash* Laurie has seen the idyllic early days of their relationship crumble into mutual, bitter recriminations. Des says that he would rather be unhappy and have a car than be unhappy and have no car. Happiness does not even enter into the equation. Wynn realizes that the love has gone out of her marriage, that she is involved in an arrangement of convenience. *Sweet Substitute* does not foreground its disillusionment. It deals with an adolescent world, unlike the two other films, where hope and

future possibilities spring eternal, but we realize finally that Tom has made the wrong decision in his life and it will only be a short time before his marriage to Elaine ends up like Colin and Laurie's in *The Bitter Ash* or Doug and Wynn's in *When Tomorrow Dies*.

However, choices are available in all three films, and their narrative structure foregrounds this notion, but the choices are all viewed in terms of people; it seems impossible to make other significant changes, to jobs, or to oneself. In *The Bitter Ash* the options seem particularly limited. Nevertheless, Des has travelled in Europe, but when his money ran out he saw no advantages in being poor so he has returned to work as a printer. If he is trying to escape the trap that Julie represents, his growing friendship with Laurie does not provide an alternative. While the two of them finally have sex, it is an encounter tinged with repulsion and invective. Laurie ends up feeling like "a used dish rag" and Des like a john who's taken a prostitute. Des's options seem particularly limited.

Des accepts his fate (in the last shot of the film he phones Julie and proposes marriage) largely because there seems to be no way out, but Tom in *Sweet Substitute* is confronted by a real choice and makes the wrong decision. Tom is faced with two women in his life: Elaine and Cathy who respectively become paradigms of two very different types of women. Elaine is female body, female wile, female artfulness, using her sexuality to entice and ensnare Tom. She is also blonde, aware of her looks, associated with make-up, and is always seen in a dress, usually with her hair up. She has objectified herself for the male gaze. At one point she removes two teddy bears from her bed; mute, cute toys, they express a naive, child-like, traditional view of relationships—papa bear, momma bear. (In *The Bitter Ash* Des resigns himself to his fate with ironic bitterness, "Guess a guy has to get married sometime. God, I can see it now: Momma, Daddy and little Baby Blue.")

Cathy, on the other hand, is Elaine's mirror opposite. Dark-haired, intelligent, thoughtful, she has no time for stereotypical femininity. She eschews make-up, spends little time on her appearance and is invariably dressed in jeans. While Elaine turns herself into a consumable object, Cathy functions at the level of ideas, is associated with studying, the mind, and travel: she is planning to spend a year in Paris. Tom and Cathy's relationship is natural and relaxed, absent is the sexual tension of his time spent with Elaine, but as an early scene suggests, if Macbeth's tragic flaw is ambition, Tom's, as he eyes a pair of neatly-crossed legs, is lust. While conversation with Elaine remains at the level of the infra-red guns they have just seen in the latest James Bond movie, Cathy's talk is associated with culture (Byron, Europe) and a strong sense of her independent role as a woman. Elaine wants to escape the boredom of her job, to retreat from the world into marriage, whereas Cathy sees herself as getting a job and playing a useful role in society, of going out into the world as an equal partner.

Wynn in *When Tomorrow Dies*, the frustrated housewife, who is taken for granted by her husband and two

daughters, also confronts a real choice in her life. Tired of being treated like a piece of furniture, she decides to go back to school, in spite of the resistance she faces from the patriarchal order that rules her life: her husband and her sick father. As a result, she discovers happiness and excitement; even her appearance begins to change as her rather severe pinned-up hair is literally and metaphorically let down. She soon finds herself attracted to her English professor, a man of culture, who listens to her. Her husband, Doug, a rather unimaginative accountant preoccupied with climbing up the corporate ladder, is left behind as Wynn decides to have an affair with Trevelyan; but it is a short-lived transgression. She returns home to husband and family, realizing that life with Trevelyan (and perhaps any man) would be no different: the same patterns would soon be established.

This leads to the next point about these films, the sense of determinism and fatalism inscribed into their discourse. Des is bitter about life but unprepared to sacrifice material comforts for the risks involved in changing that life. Laurie prompts him to do something but he can't. His anger is rebellious, he even talks about getting a machine-gun and shooting "the shit-pots" that are trying to turn him into a number for the rest of his life, but he remains impotent to effect change. Tom in *Sweet Substitute* envies Cathy because she is going to Europe, but when she prompts him to go on a trip as well, he makes an excuse about having to get his scholarship. Elaine becomes his fated lot in life, and by the end of that film, Tom is implicated totally in an economic system that will control him for the rest of his life, providing his wife with material comforts, jewellery and furs.

Wynn's rebellion in *When Tomorrow Dies* is more complex, but equally stunted. She knows why she is unhappy and for a moment is determined to do something about it. Apparently inexplicably, she finally only views Trevelyan as another Doug; life will be no different with him. There is no question here, nor is there any in *The Bitter Ash*, of Wynn or Laurie living alone. Their options are seen only in terms of other men. But the context of Wynn's fling with Trevelyan is illuminating, for it follows her hysteria upon finding her eldest daughter engaged in a wild party at home. Wynn's affair is placed next to her daughter's emerging sexuality, which the mother tries to control. Her uneasy relationship with her daughter's sexuality has classic Freudian overtones of the Oedipal conflict, the fight for the father/husband's affection. At one moment Wynn catches her daughter and her boyfriend necking on the beach, an act she interrupts ("I don't want you making decisions you're not ready for yet"). Significantly, her own sexual indiscretion with Trevelyan takes place on a beach. We can only view Wynn as a woman at war with herself, struggling between the sensual, relaxed "teenage" part of herself and the severe, controlled wife, her "adult" side.

Significantly, the frustrations in the films, with marriage, jobs, relationships, all climax in a moment of anger—Des talking about getting a gun, Tom approaching a hooker, Wynn throwing a tantrum when she walks in on her

daughter's party—and this anger finds an almost immediate sexual release—Des and Laurie make violent love, Tom virtually rapes Cathy, Wynn slips into Trevelyan's arms—before there is a return to the status quo—Des returns to Julie, Tom get engaged to Elaine, Wynn returns home to Doug. The anger is projected onto people, is released through sex and displaces any attempt to change the society in which they find themselves.

There is also a strong sense of arrested motion in these films which is vividly contrasted to their visual and psychological restlessness. Both of the credit sequences to *Sweet Substitute* and *When Tomorrow Dies* articulate this idea: movement is followed by freeze frames. In the latter film a woman is running and her flight is "frozen" a number of times as the credits appear, her attempt at escape halted in mid-movement in an eerie foreshadowing of what will befall her.

Common to the early work is a thinly veiled political subtext deeply critical of modern society. People are seen as little more than commodities, to be used, sometimes bought and occasionally discarded. There is a strong current of commodity-exchange to their relationships where marriage becomes a trade-off between what the female offers (sex) against what the male can give (economic security). Sex often has a price, reducing people to objects who can be bought like prostitutes. In *Sweet Substitute*, Tom's scholarship to university is rewarded with a car. At work one can be discarded like a worn-out tool. In *The Bitter Ash* Des' terminally ill friend is now ignored by a system that has no use for him, while in *When Tomorrow Dies* Wynn's father, an ex-mill worker, has been safety put away to die in a nursing home.

Class-tensions surface in all three films in a marked way. In *The Bitter Ash* Des is a printer while Colin has pretensions to write and cultivates a group of intellectual friends who discuss art, philosophy and religion. Worker and middle-class playwright finally square off, but only within the context of sexual rights over Laurie, and nothing is learned from the encounter. The symptoms of everyone's malaise are graphically shown, but the source of their discontent remain largely concealed. In *Sweet Substitute*, Elaine is pushed ahead by a mother who wants her to step up a class and marry a teacher ("You've never heard of a teacher's wife having to work or a teacher being unemployed"). She has made the mistake of marrying a man who works with his hands. Tom, with his chances of a scholarship is well on his way into the middle-class, unlike his layabout brother who has missed this opportunity. *When Tomorrow Dies* carries ominous warnings of class-conflict in its first moments, when Wynn's father heaps invective on that "old bastard living on the hill like a lord, shouting down depression every time he wants to lower the wages and raise the hours." Wynn has obviously risen out of this class through her marriage to Doug which has given her elegant clothes, a car of her own, a beautiful house and a swimming pool. But the step from the lower- or working-class up to the middle-class is not an easy one, and is often just a dead-end.

FREEDOM ATTEMPTED

High, 1967; *Façade*, 1968; *The Apprentice/Fleur bleue*, 1971)

Kent's first three films present a world of loveless marriages, numbing jobs and emotional dead-ends. Des, Tom and Wynn build their own prisons, turning away from the possibilities of escape that each film posits. The films of Kent's middle period foreground the idea of freedom, depicting people who are trying to make their escapes, following the lead that Wynn provided in *When Tomorrow Dies*. But there are immediately discernible differences in the terrain that is traversed. The characters of the first period all played their roles out within society, as workers, writers, students, teachers, businessmen, housewives. This is also true of *Façade* where the central couple are a teacher and a model, though in *High* and *The Apprentice*, Kent's protagonists live unorthodox lives on the periphery of society. They are outsiders, and law-breakers, pseudo-gangsters who either push dope and swindle rich businessmen (*High*) or rob banks (*The Apprentice*). Their marginality gives them a freedom denied the others but it finally proves to be just as illusory.

High, *Façade* and *The Apprentice* all refer back to the early films while charting new territory. They also establish a natural break in Kent's career, the early work all having been shot in Vancouver, the subsequent films all originating from Montreal. As if to recognize this partial break with his earlier work, *High* is a noticeably different film. Visually it is far more abstract and experimental. At certain moments the film shifts from black-and-white into colour; colour tints are used extensively to add an emotional tone to certain scenes; still photographs are inserted; characters are interviewed; a drug sequence is overexposed. Thematically, it also represents a significant step, the choices in *High* relate not to people (the triangular relationship structure has disappeared) but to lifestyle. Tom and Vicky, the young couple of this film, are not presented with emotional decisions involving marriage, partnerships, separation. In fact they both remain free of marriage and having to work, the two prisons of the earlier films. Tom is a drug dealer who happens on money with facility. He doesn't have to earn a living like Des, Tom (in *Sweet Substitute*) or Doug, and chooses instead to rip off the system. Vicky is also a different kind of woman. She doesn't want to trap him into marriage or even emotional commitment; their relationship is as free as their lifestyle.

There always seems to be an easy solution to their problems. Dope deals provide them with ready cash to pay the rent, using found credit cards takes them on a wild weekend to Toronto, and unsuspecting businessmen are set up by Vicky and then robbed. There is a life of complete immorality and even though they are both seen as prostitutes—the first scene of the film features Tom in bed with an older woman, he poses as a homosexual prostitute later in the film, and Vicky comes on as a bar hooker—they never become victims, powerless in the face of their position. They always control their encounters and take from them what they want, be it sex or money.

Tom is initially viewed as the one who possesses freedom, living a life of complete irresponsibility with no commitments, moving through the world with nonchalant ease, stealing money, cars, dropping into a communal household for sex, lacing the marijuana he's pushing with oregano. Vicky, on the other hand, is a straitlaced librarian with a regular job and the ways of the street are totally foreign to her. Tom "frees" Vicky from this prison, introduces her to dope and the subculture that it sustains, corrupts her innocence by offering trips to Toronto paid for on someone else's credit card. If at first she urges Tom to go back to school, her conventional attitude to life changes when she experiences the ease with which society can be exploited. But if Tom is teacher and Vicky the student, a reversal of roles begins to take place. Gradually Vicky begins to initiate action, becoming more aggressive, making decisions, leaving Tom to strum on his guitar in their room while she roams the streets, looking for more "action," needing a bigger hit each time.

Visually, Vicky becomes more "masculine," cutting her hair short, and during one sequence where she attacks a man, she wears a pant suit and a fedora. By the end of the film, she is sporting Tom's hat. She becomes cold and calculating, ruthless about money, and starts to engage in casual sex with her pick-ups before robbing them. Meanwhile, the polygamous Tom finds himself becoming impotent. Threatened by Vicky's cavalier attitude, he forces himself to pick up women in an attempt to reassert his independence but finds he cannot summon up the desire for sex. As Vicky discovers sexual freedom, Tom becomes emasculated. Their role-reversal is complete.

Tom slowly becomes aware that something must change, that Vicky has turned from being a vampire's victim into a vampire. He is persuaded by Vicky to go on one last trip (an ironic play on the world) with a rich businessman into the country. The drive ends in Vicky clubbing the man to death with a crowbar, an attack that carries economic and sexual overtones: "Just because you drive a big car and have a fat wallet, you think you can push people around." It remains ambiguous as to what kind of rebellion has actually taken place. Simply a moment of spontaneous violence, or the first step in Vicky's attack on the patriarchal order? Significantly, in a reprise of the anger/sex axis so predominant in Kent's first three films, Vicky and Tom make love in the open fields after she has killed the businessman. But unlike the early work, this is not followed by a return to the *status quo*. When Tom is off for a moment, Vicky reverses but repeats the opening shot of the film, picking Tom's pockets, taking his car keys, putting on his hat (she has now "become" the early Tom), and drives off, alone, with a big smile on her face.

In *High*, Kent questions the very meaning of freedom and finally equates it with anarchy. Vicky is a key figure in Kent's *oeuvre*, the only person who gains her freedom, lives her rebellion, escapes from control. But *High* is also the most enigmatic of Kent's films. What does freedom finally lead to? Random killings, petty larceny and the life of a criminal; a world where love has disap-



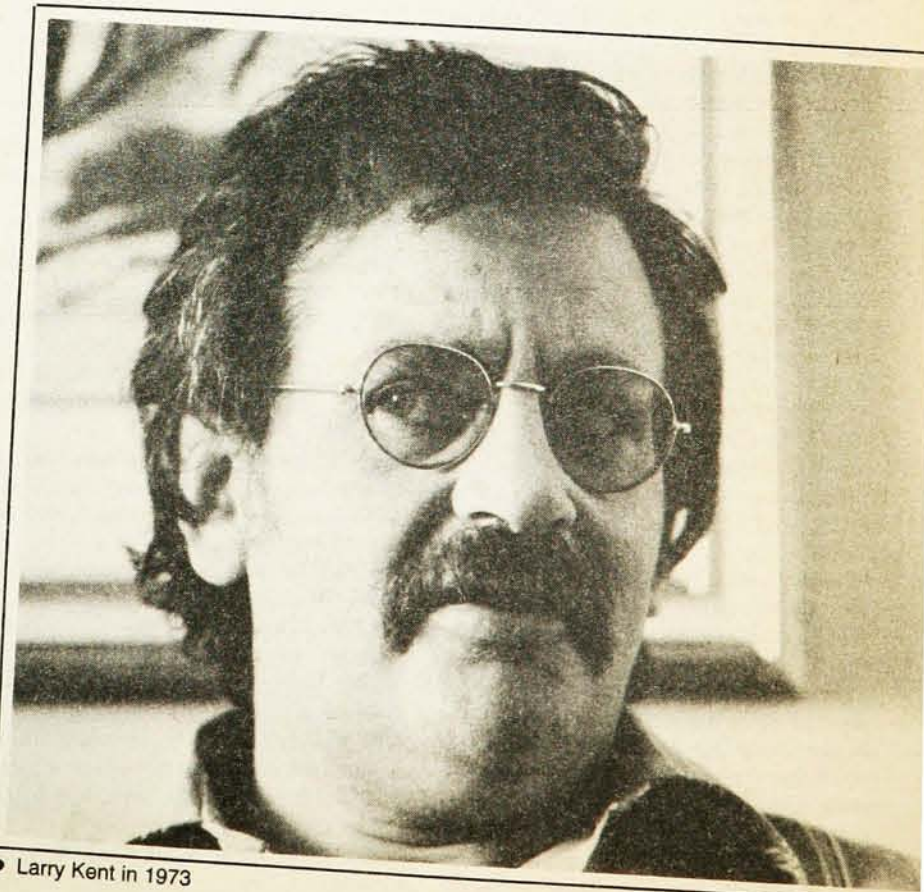
• Keep It In The Family (1973)

photo: Cinémathèque Québécoise



• When Tomorrow Dies (1965)

photo: Cinémathèque Québécoise



• Larry Kent in 1973

peared and people are treated as objects, to be used, exploited and discarded. The final question becomes: has Vicky totally subverted the male world by killing the businessman and abandoning Tom, or is she just a male surrogate, losing her humanity in the process? In this context it is tempting to read the film not as liberation but as loss.

High extends certain formal and thematic concerns. Earlier I referred to the arbitrary editing and shooting style of the first three films. Classical editing decisions are spurned in favour of a formal style that subverts our expectations and disorients us at certain moments (e.g., the long flashback in *The Bitter Ash* is from Laurie's point of view but at one moment it becomes Colin's, making a strange rupture with accepted practice). If the style that Don Owen employs in *Nobody Waved Good-bye* is illusionist, Kent showed that he was not at ease working within this tradition.

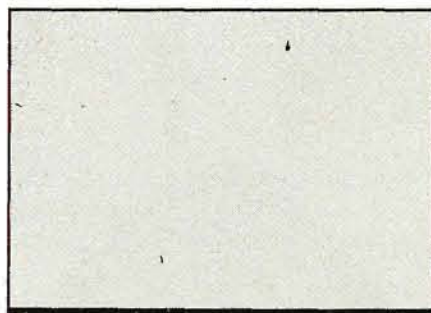
The films from Kent's early period also rupture the realist illusion in their use of fantasy sequences, and this device becomes increasingly important in *High*, *Façade* and *The Apprentice*. The fantasy scenes in *The Bitter Ash*, *Sweet Substitute* and *When Tomorrow Dies* are all placed against a grim, restricting reality. The long flashback in *The Bitter Ash* contains Laurie's memories of her past with her father and mother arguing over her marriage, but it also contains romantic and idyllic remembrances of her early love for Colin. Constructed as a memory flashback, its sense of an idealized past carries overtones of fantasy. Both *Sweet Substitute* and *When Tomorrow Dies* include two specific fantasy scenes, the one in the first film, a brief erotic daydream seen from Tom's perspective (contained only in the release version for the United States entitled *Caressed*). The device is used again in *When Tomorrow Dies*, with Wynn, after a bitter fight with her family, dreaming about being the centre of attention in a charmed world of sports cars, restaurants, attendant men and luxurious clothes.

If the reality these films depict is full of frustration and rancour, the dreams allow for the play of an imagination that wants to transcend this reality. *High* (and *Façade*), pushes this intervention much further, employing a number of devices that demand to be read—the use of colour-tints with certain scenes, the inclusion of still photographs which rupture the imaginary space at certain moments, the switching from black and white into colour at two moments in the film. The use of dreams and fantasies in the first films is straightforward, but in *High* these devices that disturb the realist illusion are far more ambiguous and complex and cannot really be considered as fantasies (although an extended scene tries to recreate a drug "high"). Kent's play with these formal strategies, which function as a challenge to realist notions of narrative construction, complement his thematic concerns. As his characters try and escape from a reality perceived as a trap, prison, a living death, the films also begin to subvert the realist, illusionist aesthetic. The use of jump-cuts, mock interviews, contrived theatricality, is connected to the capriciousness of the early work, but the switch into colour at two moments—the photo session in the

park, and the death of the businessman—is not a moment of fanciful experimentation. It has been too carefully considered to be anything but a key to unlocking the meaning of the film.

In the photo-session scene, Vicky is out pushing Tom in a wheelchair in the park. It is meant to be playful and bizarre, but it already carries overtones of their relationship—Tom, a crippled passenger pushed by the stronger Vicky. Tom has a camera and takes nine pictures, which we see as colour insertions immediately after they are taken. The first two photographs are of boots lying in the grass, and of trees. When they see a couple walking hand-in-hand, Tom takes seven pictures of them. At first the couple starts to walk away, but then they run, pursued by Tom and Vicky. The image of the colour photographs is blurred and overexposed, and the horizon often tilted. The couple look desperate until Tom's wheelchair falls over, the last picture he takes is almost entirely of the sky, although Vicky's face can just be seen in one corner of the frame.

This vignette is similar in many ways to the opening credit scenes of *Sweet Substitute* and *When Tomorrow Dies*—live action and freeze-frame alternating back and forth, a sense of arrested motion, of escapes that will be stopped, of potential that will remain unrealized. The photo session in *High* carries other possible readings. Tom photographs people in the same way he takes pictures of objects and the landscape. He and Vicky are also seen as pursuers, as



LARRY KENT - FILMOGRAPHY

Born Johannesburg, South Africa, 16 May 1937. Emigrated to Canada in 1957. Worked as a printer and studied at UBC, Vancouver. Moved to Montreal in 1966.

1963 *The Bitter Ash* 79 min., 16mm, bw (director/script/producer).

1964 *Sweet Substitute* 85 min., 16mm, bw (director/script/producer).

1965 *When Tomorrow Dies* 88 min., 16mm, bw (director/co-script/producer).

1967 *High* 79 min., 16mm, col/bw (director/script/producer).

1968 *Façade* 71 min., 16mm, col. (director/script).

1970 *The Apprentice/Fleur bleue* 81 min., 35mm, col. (director).

1971 *Saskatchewan-45°* below 14min., 16mm, col. (director).

1972 *Cold pizza* 19 min., 16mm, col. (director).

1973 *Keep It in the family* 91 min., 35mm, col. (director).

1977 *The Slavers* 96 min., 35mm, col. (director/co-script/producer).

1979 *Yesterday* 98 min., 35mm, col. (director).

predators, and this is foregrounded when colour is used again in the film. The murder of the businessmen is shot with coloured tints but afterwards Vicky and Tom, laughing, carry his body across a field, and this is shot in full colour. In fact it carries many visual overtones of the photo-session, in its use of colour (greens predominate), landscape (set against trees) and composition (a couple is centred, the dead man's body is almost invisible). Here, Tom and Vicky have literally become predators, in a way only suggested in the earlier scene.

High's meaning is contained, in these sequences that demand a reading, in moments of highly mediated image-construction. Meaning does not emanate entirely from psychologically complex characters, the central mode of our narrative tradition, but from discreet sections of visual structuring which foreground their photographic and formal properties. Experimentation with images and structure is pushed to even greater lengths in *Façade*, a film that went unreleased and has literally only been seen by a few people. It remains Kent's most ambitious film and, despite lapses, reveals an artist who is pushing himself and his craft to the limit. If one forgives some of its simplistic imagery (models waiting for an interview are placed next to a shot of sides of beef hanging in a slaughterhouse), the rest of the film contains much of interest. It is no lost masterpiece and perhaps it is a failed experiment, but its audacious willingness to take risks can only be commended.

In its examination of an unhappy marriage between a college professor and a beautiful model, friends of the couple are interviewed speaking directly to the camera, an off-screen interviewer is employed at certain moments, the use of dream/fantasy is extensively used, and visually coloured tints, optical printing, solarization, split-screen, multiple images (as many as nine at a time in one frame), and rear projection, are continually present, *Façade* is a reprise of the ground covered in *When Tomorrow Dies*, focussing on the problems of a married couple, primarily from the woman's perspective. Julian, a young, energetic college professor, and Sherry, an attractive model, are not really happy in their marriage. Their sex-life is mediocre; Julian is a poor lover; and Sherry is a bundle of sexual frustration, unfortunately finding herself working in a profession that has to use sex to sell the products she is marketing. Sexually unsatisfied at home, she carries this unease into her work where she's told she has a lot to learn: looking pretty is not enough, there's sex involved.

Façade situates its couple in a very specific social context. The world that Julian and Sherry live in is a frightening place; when they turn on the television, riots and wars, the sounds of sirens and gunshots, are brought into their living room. A woman runs to pick up a child as explosions detonate all around her and a voice warns Sherry not to go out there: "You don't have a chance." Premature ejaculation is comically situated in the context of an atom bomb exploding, but the scene has another edge to it: could the anxiety of living in a nuclear world be the cause of Julian's sexual ineptness?

If the world is perceived as threaten-

ing, it is also a world of images that defines who and what this couple are and think. When Sherry flips through a magazine, commercial images of women using sex to sell consumer products proliferate. As a model, Sherry is directly implicated in the image-making industry. But both Julian and Sherry have trouble with their "self-images." He refers to them as "the best-looking couple in town," but beneath the surface problems abound. Julian sees himself as a racing-car driver (a male image of potency and power) and cannot break away from this fantasy. Sherry grapples with her romantic fantasies of fairy-tale ("Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess and her name was Sherry") and imagines her and her lover as Beatty and Dunaway playing Bonnie and Clyde.

This world of images, part of the consumer world that also in a way "consumes" Julian and Sherry, turns into a nightmare. Sherry leaves for New York to become more involved in the image industry and eventually has a breakdown. During this breakdown the image literally fragments before our eyes. But there is in *Façade* a discourse of resistance, a sense that something has to be changed. In his work, Julian is questioning taboos, like the use of the word "fuck" in literature. In one of his lectures he draws a distinction between reform and revolution, suggesting that the latter is what may be needed. ("They are interrelated but not interchangeable. Reform may be modifying an opinion; revolution is associated with an intense and desirable need for change in a society that has become decadent.") Although there is a 'revolutionary' side to Julian (he is framed next to a poster of Ché Guevara), his talk, like Des's in *The Bitter Ash*, is never transformed into action, and he is not prepared to change the damaging fantasy he has of being a racing-car driver, an image he confesses it has taken him years to build and which he is not about to alter.

It is left to Sherry to act in an attempt to free herself. Like Wynn in *When Tomorrow Dies*, she also leaves her husband, but this time it is for New York and a man she met at a party. But Sherry's escape is similarly doomed to failure. His new lover also disappoints her, and she finds her attempts to get modelling work no more rewarding than before. By the end of *Façade*, Sherry, after suffering a breakdown, has returned to Julian, but the reconciliation is marred by death, images of prison and more unhappiness. He drifts into the arms of prostitutes while she takes casual lovers. Cemeteries and gravestones predominate in the final moments of the film.

Throughout *Façade*, Sherry tries to free herself—from Julian, from her past, from the trap of her sexuality—into happiness. While she has an incomplete sex-life, there is a sexuality struggling to express itself. She masturbates and fantasizes of climaxing with a lover, but in many of these scenes, there is another voice, that of her mother, which fills her with guilt and causes her to have nightmares where she is pursued and punished by priests. As she tries to liberate herself—to become more sexual, like her québécois friend, and more independent—she finds she cannot escape her past nor a consumer society that

oppresses and victimizes her. Yet wrapped up with Sherry's sexual confusions is an unconscious desire for a child that seems to be both wanted and feared at the same time. Images of children are prominent in the film and at many moments are associated with Sherry. The last sections of *Façade* register despair (shots of cemeteries) and absence (Julian and Sherry have drifted into mechanical sex with other partners) but the final shot of the film is of a child. And is complex, because initially the frame holds nine separate images: the child is at the centre and the other eight images feature shots of a woman's face, which are then replaced by shots of gravestones until all these images disappear and we are left with the single image of the child, surrounded by an ominous black frame; nevertheless an image of the future. *Façade*, unlike *When Tomorrow Dies* and *The Bitter Ash*, finds it possible to project a potential beyond the end of the film, escaping the sense of closure, of possibilities and hope, that the early films communicate.

This open ending is not found in *The Apprentice*, simultaneously shot in French as *Fleur bleue*, a light, airy, off-beat piece of work, that ends in the death of its protagonist and suggests, once and for all in Kent's universe, that escape of any sort is impossible. Jean-Pierre is the most likeable of all of Kent's male characters, but he too has a fatal flaw. He is a perpetual vacillator, unable to decide what he wants, who he wants and what he should do. He is acted upon as the classic victim. Innocent and naive, he is used by people while he lets himself be used. Continually shown to be "in-between" – between English and French, between two women, between action and apathy – he is finally impotent.

Jean-Pierre recognizes the need for change in his life but doesn't know how to go about it except by imitating others who he thinks are free. Fired from his job as a lighting assistant on commercials, he is tired of being taken advantage of and envies the assured lifestyle of his girlfriend's brother, Dock, a small-time gangster never short of cash or girls. Michelle, his fiancée, continually tries to arouse Jean-Pierre, urging him to get an education as a way of escaping the Anglophone subjugation. But Jean-Pierre, like Tom in *Sweet Substitute*, is drawn to the wrong women, in this case the whimsical Elizabeth Hawkins, an American model he meets on a commercial.

Michelle, referred to as a separatist, is certainly aware of the political and cultural subjugation of her province. She challenges Jean-Pierre, resists his desire for sex, confronts him. Unfortunately he is intrigued by the flighty charms of Elizabeth who feeds his libido, offers him the easy outlet of available sex and the excitement of restaurants, clubs and a good time. She finally corrupts him.

Jean-Pierre faces a choice between two women and everything they represent. Life with Michelle, the québécoise, is cast in traditional terms – commitment, hard work, a value structure, education, marriage, sexual abstinence until marriage – while Elizabeth, the American, the Other, comes to signify virtually everything that is the opposite – no ties, no values, easy sex, an unorthodox and erratic lifestyle, pleasure. Finally

needing money to court Elizabeth, Jean-Pierre drifts into robbing banks with Dock.

The signs of Jean-Pierre's colonization, the barriers to his freedom, surround him everywhere, both culturally and personally, yet he can do nothing to alter this reality. All his transactions with power or authority are in English: with his landlady, his bank, a travel agency, in a clothing store and even with his priest. This only leaves him the margins for his own language which he speaks with his fiancée and her brother, the people who are in effect his family. French is the language of personal relationships, English that of commercial transactions that take place "out there" in the social world. His crippled access to language, and hence to society and the power it dispenses, becomes catalyzed around the character of Elizabeth, for this is where Jean-Pierre chooses his own oppression by mixing the personal and the social, by tying himself to a person who functions without a value system, who is essentially aimless. As their first exchange of words indicates she will eventually kill him – Jean-Pierre corrects her pronunciation of a deodorant she is advertising from "Tuez-moi" (kill me) to "Tu et moi" (you and me).

Ultimately, Jean-Pierre, like his predecessor Tom in *Sweet Substitute*, builds his own prison. But in *The Apprentice* the implications of this are taken a step further. Jean-Pierre never actually chooses between the two women. By the end of the film, both are pregnant with his child and Jean-Pierre has flipped back and forth between marrying one and then the other. His life is total confusion and when he goes off to rob one more bank (only to be killed) it is possible to see this as a kind of suicide.

In the early films choices that represented escape were only posed in terms of other people. In *High*, *Façade* and *The Apprentice*, choices centre not just around people but deal with more general social, cultural and economic questions. If Des, Tom and Wynn all live in a society that oppresses them, the source of that oppression, the reality of that society, often remained invisible. The final effect of the middle-period films may be similar to that of the early work (escape and freedom is impossible), but the symptoms of that malaise are more clearly specified – a consumer world of images and sex and an atmosphere of violence in *Façade*, and a specific form of cultural, historical and economic colonization in *The Apprentice*. In *High* the society Vicky and Tom are rebelling against is also consumer and sexually oriented but by exploiting its contradictions (drugs, sex-for-hire, credit-cards) the two of them prosper in a way that none of Kent's other protagonists do. Nevertheless, they become totally immoral and amoral in the process, losing what humanity they have, ending up as criminals and murderers.

LOVE DISCOVERED

(*Keep It in the Family*, 1972; *Yesterday*, 1979)

Kent's first three films dealt with trapped people living loveless lives incapable of resolving their dilemmas or making the wrong decisions. The next three films turned to protagonists

who were straining against these constraints which were perceived in specific social, economic and cultural terms. His characters were placed more consciously within a society that was seen as the root cause of many of their frustrations and their malaise had shifted somewhat from the personal to the social, from the individual to the collective. But the films of Kent's middle-period saw him moving no further ahead in his attempt to resolve these tensions, and point a way out of these traps.

For commercial reasons, but also perhaps for other motives, *Keep It in the Family* marks a real fracture. *The Apprentice* has ended, for the first time, in the death of its central character and it was a culmination in more ways than one. Directionless, lost, a victim, Jean-Pierre has nowhere else to go. *Keep It in the Family*, an empty-headed comedy, points us in a new direction that would be confirmed by *Yesterday*. Along with *Slavers*, *Keep It in the Family* is Kent's least interesting film, and certainly represents a significant shift in tone and concern. It also begins a fallow period in Kent's career which has only seen him make three films in the last 15 years.*

More conventional than anything Kent had done, *Keep It in the Family* is rooted firmly in the conventions of naturalist cinema, and consequently all the rich experimentation of his previous work has vanished. It lacks his distinctive visual style, strives to create an often slapstick comedy that rarely works and gives us awkward, two-dimensional characters who lean towards the grotesque. The plot centres around a teenage couple, Karen and Alex, who want to leave the communal house they find themselves living in (a throwback to *High*) and set up in an elaborate high-rise apartment. But they have no money and their parents refuse to give them any, so they decide to use sex to get what they want, devising a scheme whereby Alex's father will fall for Karen and Karen's mother will be smitten by Alex. Almost immediately we are back in familiar Kent territory – the use of sex as a form of commodity exchange, a couple of dissatisfied marriages and a basic triangular structure that multiplies as the film progresses.

But if the patterns are similar the pain is not. Conflict and bitterness have been replaced by superficiality and emotional glibness. Karen unexpectedly falls in love with Alex's father, which confuses the equation, and even plans to marry him, but in an extraordinary sequence of events everyone ends up happy, even if in some cases partners have been swapped. The final sequence, set in a church where Alex and Karen are about to marry, has ironic overtones – the priest, instead of reading from the marriage ceremony, finds himself in the burial service instead – but the trite ending, where everyone uncouples and happily re-couples, removes any sting that this satire might have contained.

However, *Keep It in the Family* has thematic importance for Kent because so much of the agony of the previous films has been removed. In its place we find an almost obsessive search for love and a belief that everything will work out. Finally Karen and Alex are reunited and the parents, living out unhappy

marriages, escape into new partnerships. As if to recognize the distance that he and his characters have travelled, everyone in *Keep It in the Family* is either middle-class, or in the case of Alex and Karen, desperate to assume that lifestyle. The communal house they try to escape is the only place where such values are resisted and it is seen as a place of dirty dishes, unattended children, that in the words of one of its tenants, "stinks."

Love is the engine that drives the narrative in *Keep It in the Family* and is central to *Yesterday* as well. In some ways *Yesterday* travels back over some of the ground explored in *The Apprentice* (the French-English tension in Quebec in particular) but it also speaks to a number of ideas in Kent's other work. Set in 1967, an American student, Matt, is studying at McGill, and he meets Gabrielle, a student at an art college. Their relationship develops against a social, political and cultural backdrop that intrudes at important moments in the film. Kent carefully establishes a number of very specific moral and political positions in the film. Matt is initially proudly nationalist (his father was killed in Korea), defending American involvement in Vietnam, but under Gabrielle's influence, modifies his views and initially refuses to be drafted for Vietnam. Gabrielle is a pacifist who feels that if "everyone stopped going, there wouldn't be any more wars," and her brother, Claude, a rabid separatist, can't understand why his sister is involved with an American. Matt's uncle, also American, believes in unquestioningly answering the call of duty.

Gradually, all of the moral positions are subverted. When Claude is rescued by Matt after being badly burnt in a bomb attack, his hatred for the American turns to respect and his political activities never again intrude into the film. For Matt, duty finally wins out. After being expelled, refusing the draft and being visited by his uncle, he drops into a draft-counselling office but is so turned off by the attitude of the draft-dodgers he meets that he enlists. Even Gabrielle's pacifism is completely neutralized by her love for Matt. All of their moral beliefs evaporate in the face of events. Revealingly, Matt foregoes his relationship with Gabrielle for his country, while Gabrielle is forced to alter her beliefs for love of Matt.

Yesterday is full of conventions that translate into an unmistakable ideological position. Marriage in *Yesterday* is not seen as a trap at all, but as something valuable, the final expression of love, an emotion that takes precedence over beliefs or values. Gabrielle never loses her love for Matt and is finally rewarded for her patience. Even the older generation are not involved in unhappy marriages. The conventional attitudes extend most insidiously into the depiction of Matt and Gabrielle who both become idealized conceptions of the male and female. Gabrielle is not out to use feminine wiles to trap Matt. Instead she is selfless, understanding, forgiving, and self-sacrificing. Most importantly, she never stops loving her man. She becomes a male dream.

Matt is also quite different than any of Kent's other male protagonists. His dilemma is not erotic but moral; the sexual confusions of Dez (*The Bitter Ash*), Tom (*Sweet Substitute*), Julian

*A just completed feature, *High Stakes*, shot in Vancouver late in 1985, is not included in this article.

(*Façade*), Jean-Pierre (*The Apprentice*) and Alex (*Keep It in the Family*) are foreign to him. Finally, Matt does his duty, enlists and goes off to Vietnam. All of Kent's other films de-mystified the male, showing them to be confused in their goals, never totally in control, often guided by their sexual urges to the detriment of their lives. But *Yesterday* marks a radical shift in attitude to male and female, a reaffirmation of belief in traditional values—love, the couple, marriage, trust, honour. As an indication of how far Kent has travelled just compare Colin and Laurie's marriage in *The Bitter Ash* to Matt and Gabrielle's relationship in *Yesterday*.

A MAD, MAD WORLD (*The Slavers*, 1977)

In some respect *The Slavers* is an exception in Kent's career, a piece of exploitation filmmaking with few redeeming qualities. Chronologically, it was made between *Keep It in the Family* and *Yesterday*, although it has just become available recently. Shot in 1977, Kent lost control of the film because of money he owed, and subsequently the film was completed without his involvement. Nevertheless, his credit for direction, original story and screenplay remains, and the conception remains his, even if the final product is not entirely his own. Apparently the most significant changes lie in the dialogue and with the voices. The film was shot silent, everything was post-dubbed so it was easy to make the changes. Kent estimates that about 80% of the dialogue has been changed, and that the voices of characters like the Professor and his assistant are not those he would have chosen.

As a story *The Slavers* bears some relation to the pornographic novel, *The Story of O*. A mad scientist has developed a scheme whereby women are kidnapped, subjected to drugs and a technique of punishment and reward designed to force them into meek submission and obedience, before being sold into slavery for men with bizarre sexual needs. The professor is gay, which apparently partially explains his animosity towards women (an extremely regressive portrait of a homosexual, one might add), and he is surrounded by a grotesque collection of henchmen: an ex-Nazi and a couple of psychotic hit-men who suffer from a variety of sexual deficiencies and occasionally are allowed to rape the women held captive.

Into this perverse pool of deviancy is placed our hero and heroine, who ironically have never met each other. Sharon Dalby is kidnapped at the beginning of the film and a young man, Jim Carmody, answers an ad placed in the newspaper by Sharon's father offering a reward for her whereabouts. Toward the end of *The Slavers*, Jim and Sharon become a kind of couple. Locked up together in the professor's hideous country retreat, they struggle to stay alive and escape the nightmare.

The Slavers is undoubtedly misogynist cinema. It opens with a woman hunted by dogs before being brutally shot, and it features various violences towards women: rape, throat-slitting, acid poured over their faces, needles

being inserted into their eyes (less horrific than it sounds it is done through stills and is a scene that Kent did not shoot). Women are tortured, punished, made to obey commands, and wear collars like animals.

The antidote to this patriarchal world gone insane is meant to be Jim but his attempt to save Sharon is not motivated by emotional concern, only the financial reward he will gain. He finally finds Sharon and helps her to escape, kills all her captors except for the professor who gets away but watches helplessly as she is swept over a waterfall to her death.

It could be possible to argue that *The Slavers* is an anomaly in Kent's career, a film made for purely commercial reasons after a five-year absence from filmmaking. After all, the saccharine *Yesterday* would follow, acting as a balance to the harsh, brutal vision of life found in this film. But there are too many interesting points of intersection to dismiss it so easily (even if one would like to do so). The first images of *The Slavers* show a woman running, trying to escape, an escape that is arrested. The film ends with a recapitulation of these shots, a woman running and stumbling.

We find these very same images in the credit sequence of *When Tomorrow Dies* and upon closer examination it is possible to see that *The Slavers* contains a grotesque but recognizable distortion of the Kent thematic. Here the male world has finally revealed its true nature: peopled by psychotics and madmen, its sole concern is the subjugation of women. Arguably, in a less exaggerated fashion this is also the primary thrust of *The Bitter Ash*, *When Tomorrow Dies* and *Façade*. In none of these films do women escape patriarchal control, and in *The Slavers* they are either killed or mutilated if they attempt to flee.

This is not to defend the film, because much of it is reprehensible, but only to suggest that it is not the exception that it first appears to be. Indeed, Kent may have been working out some of his darkest feelings about men, women and society in *The Slavers*.

CONCLUSION

Realist cinema has always used a kind of observational determinism to justify the world it depicts: I show what I see. If what I see is a world of failed marriages, bitter couples, scheming women, gutless men, then this is what is depicted in the films. I cannot alter the world that I see because that would be a distortion and it is only my function to mirror reality. The realist aesthetic informs most of our cinema and in particular the English-Canadian film. It is a tradition inherited from Grierson, cultivated by the Film Board and ingrained into our most important achievements: from the Unit B classics, through *Nobody Waved Good-bye* to *Goin' Down the Road to Ticket to Heaven*, by way of countless other films too numerous to mention.

Kent has an uneasy relationship to the dominant realist tradition. His first six films reveal increasing frustration with the limitations of this aesthetic. As his characters attempt to transcend their reality, the cinematic strategies he

employs specifically enunciate this desire, from the unusual flashback structure of *The Bitter Ash* to the formal challenges of *Façade*. However, although these strategies trouble the realist surface they never allow Kent to transcend the implications of the realist dilemma which, in the case of Canadian cinema, turns its protagonists into victims. The dreams, the fantasies, of escape, love, happiness, remain unrealized. Perhaps this is a just fate because the dreams of his characters are sentimental and escapist, often centred around a romantic and idyllic vision of the couple.

But the first six films all inscribe into their discourse a need for change, a recognition that society as it is presently constituted is oppressive, treats people like commodities, teaches them materialist values that only bring unhappiness, and exploits their sexuality. Nevertheless, no change occurs, no escapes are made, no liberation is achieved. As in so much of our cinema, from the realist offerings of Shebib to the surreal fantasies of Cronenberg, everyone is constrained by barriers that remain partially invisible. Attempts to transcend reality are doomed to failure. Des in *The Bitter Ash*, Tom in *Sweet Substitute*, Wynn in *When Tomorrow Dies*, Sherry in *Façade*, Jean-Pierre in *The Apprentice*, all end up more or less where they started, the circularity of their narratives emphasizing the return to the *status quo* is one form or another. Only *High* avoids this *stasis*. If one wants to look at the films even more closely it is possible to argue that all attempts to do something, anything, are doomed. Possible moments of contestation are consistently subverted. Attempts at creation (Colin's writing in *The Bitter Ash*) or the serious examination of ideas (just think of all the professors in Kent's films: Trevelyan in *When Tomorrow Dies*, Julian in *Façade*, John in *The Apprentice*, the teacher in *Sweet Substitute*) are ridiculed and associated with impotency (Julian), irrelevancy (John) or juvenile delusions (Colin). Vicky (*High*) challenges the dominant order and Sherry's Québécoise friend in *Façade* is totally relaxed in her sexuality, but these are really the only examples of successful resistance in the films.

Keep It in the Family and *Yesterday* see Kent turning away from these questions. Both are conventional examples of realist cinema, and not surprisingly they affirm traditional societal values: the family, the couple, love, marriage. This form of cinema has taught us over the decades that these are the only ways that happiness can be achieved, equilibrium maintained, conflict resolved. So the arc of Kent's career registers this withdrawal from the painful questions that anti-realist forms imply.

Despite the disappointment of the work that follows *The Apprentice*, Kent deserves attention in our cinema on the evidence of his first six films. Their importance is multiple: in their uneasy relationship to the realist aesthetic, their implicit recognition of the link between the sexual and the political, their sub-text of class-relations (in a supposedly classless society), and in their merciless dissection of consumer society and its attitudes. But one of Kent's greatest distinctions surely lies in his early recognition of the inability of the realist discourse to contain the

feminine. If realist cinema naturalizes patriarchy and the established order, the characters who challenge the status quo in Kent's films are virtually all women: Laurie (*The Bitter Ash*), Cathy (*Sweet Substitute*), Wynn (*When Tomorrow Dies*), Vicky (*High*) and Sherry (*Façade*). Their desire continually fractures these films, at the narrative level and as formal interventions in the fictive space of the films themselves. Their desires (for happiness, fulfilment, independence, sexual satisfaction) cannot be attained or contained within the conventional, and when they try to realize these desires, this turns into a transgression. But, functioning within the patriarchal, these women are only allowed the options, as Julia Kristeva has suggested, of silence, madness or co-option.

Their continual association with water (Laurie remembering her early romance with Colin on the beach in *The Bitter Ash*; Cathy wandering on the beach after having slept with Tom in *Sweet Substitute*; Wynn's affair with Trevelyan taking place on a beach and a sailboat in *When Tomorrow Dies*; Sherry masturbating in a bath in *Façade*) suggests a wish to return to an origin, the feminine. That this is closely connected with their transgressions reinforces the notion of resistance to the dominant order. Perhaps appropriately within Kent's formulation, Sherry in *Façade* sees herself floating face-down in a river, pursued by priests, an image of drowning set against a fear of the patriarchal.

Nevertheless, there is still one final question to be asked of Kent and his relationship to the feminine. Does he really want the escapes that his women undertake to succeed or does he let them fail because he fears the really independent woman and the consequences of her liberation? The enigmatic relationship that Kent has with his women is no doubt ideologically determined. They contest societal norms, express his deepest wishes for change, but he cannot bring himself to finally release them into freedom.

Kent remains the most overlooked figure in our cinema at this moment. His work is a significant addition to the history of film in this country, and does not stand in isolation to it. Kent is traversing ground very similar to many of our filmmakers, and his films gain in value when placed within this tradition. If, as Peter Harcourt has suggested, the Anglophone and Francophone tradition of our cinema finds its roots in *Le chat dans le sac* and *Nobody Waved Good-bye*, where we can identify a number of cultural antinomies, it is time we looked at the other key films of this period—*A tout prendre*, *Le révolutionnaire*, *La vie heureuse de Léopold Z.*, *Winter Kept Us Warm*—to verify his thesis. *The Bitter Ash* and *Sweet Substitute* obviously are a part of this project. Perhaps more importantly, it is appropriate that we now begin to examine many of the implications of the realist tradition and the works that have contested this form within our cinema. Kent has obviously contributed much to this debate and this should be acknowledged. Hopefully, the omission of his name from our critical thinking will also be corrected.